Mrs. Farrell
W. D. HOWELLS

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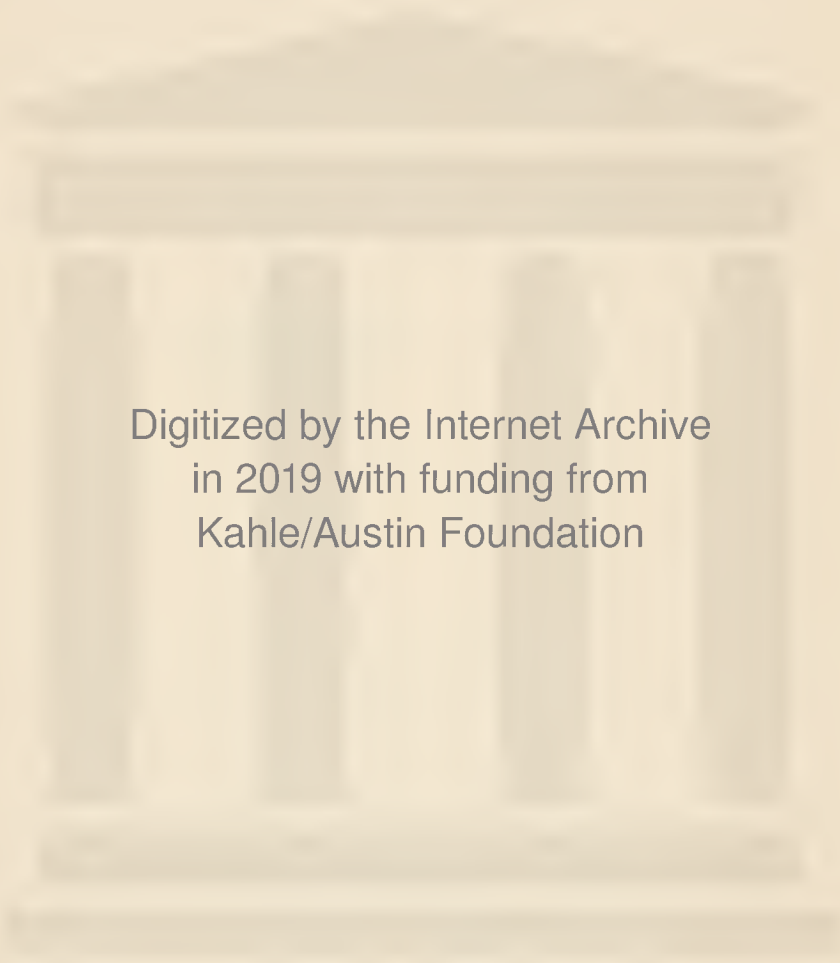

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MRS. FARRELL

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MRS. FARRELL

A NOVEL BY

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

With an Introduction by
Mildred Howells

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MRS. FARRELL

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INTRODUCTION

This story of my father's was first printed under the title of *Private Theatricals* in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1875, while he was still editor of the magazine. It appeared a few years after Henry James's *Gabrielle de Bergerac*, and neither of the two short novels was ever republished by their authors. My father's must have been written in the Concord Avenue house in Cambridge which he and my mother had just built and moved into. They were very proud of the new house, even of its mansard roof such as every house of the period was obliged to have, and which is reflected in the newly added French roofs of some of the houses near the church in West Pekin; but their greatest pride was in the library. My impressions of the house are those of rather extreme youth, but I can remember that it was lined with bookshelves bordered by bands of red, scalloped leather that were meant, as I now suppose, to keep the dust from the book tops but which were then pleasantly mysterious to the infant mind. There were very satisfactory tiles of Eastlake tendencies over the fireplace, picturing the seasons in yellow and brown, and a vast flat-topped desk in the middle of the room with rows of drawers on either side

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that went down to the floor, leaving a dark hole between them, which was useful as a doll's house when not occupied by my father's feet. The room was at the back of the house, for greater quiet, and looked out into a deep, grassy yard divided down the center by a hedge of lilacs, and only invaded by birds and children.

The background of *Mrs. Farrell* is the New England farm boarding house, which was the only form of simple country sojourn before summer cottages were imagined, and it is interesting to compare it with the farm boarding in *The Vacation of the Kelwyns*, written so many years after and giving a much fuller study of the country people. The farmhouse of this story, kept by the finer type of New England farmers, must, I think, have been the sort of summer place that my parents were always seeking, and the Kelwyns' experience a picture of what they more often found. In the latter book the country people are of much poorer stuff than the Woodwards, but one feels in his handling of them the greater tenderness and understanding that age teaches, and youth, no matter how sympathetic, cannot compass.

During the later summers, while we still lived in Cambridge, we tried many different kinds of farm board, and I wish I could remember more of them for comparison with those of Mrs. Farrell and the Kelwyns, but I can only recall one of all our landladies, a good-natured farmer's wife, so stout that her apron strings only appeared where they were tied behind her. I made many solemn journeys

around her in search of them, and I think it must have always been while she was frying doughnuts, for that act is firmly associated in my mind with her invisible apron strings. I was also vaguely conscious of a feud that raged between our hosts and their relations, over a family Bible that had reversed the squaring of the circle by having its corners worn off until it was quite round. It had been borrowed and wrongfully detained by a younger branch of the family, leaving hatred and uncharitableness behind. These reflections, I am afraid, do not throw any great light on the practical conditions of farm boarding, but they are all I have.

It is amusing to one who started life in the eighteen-seventies, to see it again from their angle in these pages written not only about them, but in them. One notes with surprise, after the feminine activity of the present, the general resignation of even faintly middle-aged ladies to headaches and invalidism, and the walks taken through woods and meadows in trailing draperies. The painting of cat-tails emerges from a very dead past, and even the more modern charcoal head of Blossom brings back the day of William Hunt's classes, when charcoal heads prevailed, and every Boston young lady of artistic taste longed to be among his pupils. Rachel Woodward's little red schoolhouse must be deserted to-day and quietly dropping apart on its country road, as so many others are doing now that their scholars have been concentrated in big graded schools; but her practical view

of her own talent and her firmness in returning what she thought more than her drawings worth to Mrs. Gilbert are of no epoch, but still endure in the New England character, unalterable as its native granite. Coming from southern Ohio, my father could, perhaps, see the New England people more clearly than if he had been one of them, and the Woodward family gives what he felt and valued in their stern uprightness and self-restraint.

The echoes of the Civil War, in the injustice of Easton's advancement in military rank over the head of his friend, come strangely to us who have just lived through another terrible conflict which has left this world weary and discouraged. In speaking of the two wars, my father said that a great difference lay in the spirit that came after them, for when the Civil War was done people in the North felt that all the troubles of the world were over, and that in the future everything was going to be right. Easton's ideas about hunting and fishing, and his desire to help the helpless, are a reflection, I think, of the writer's own feelings; and in the scene where Easton stops the rearing horse one wonders whether there survive faint traces of those early literary traditions that made my father, as he once said, feel when he began writing novels that he must have his hero do something to win the heroine, like rescuing her from a wild bull, until he observed that in real life nothing of the sort was necessary. His minute study of Easton's emotions as a lover makes one feel the sympathetic interest of a writer who was young

enough to go fully into them, and form a temptation to quote from a letter written in his later middle age, in which he says, "I do not think I can ever write of mating and marriage again."

Mrs. Gilbert's desire in her first talk with Mrs. Farrell of "a good stupid wooing—at least a year of it" for her, shows an early distrust of Romance as a foundation for life, but in their second talk together Mrs. Farrell's answer, "Nothing that's wrong can be one's own affair, I suppose: it belongs to the whole world," is of his latest, as well as his earliest philosophy.

MILDRED HOWELLS.

MRS. FARRELL

MRS. FARRELL

Chapter I

WEST PEKIN is one of those country places which have yielded to changing conditions and have ceased to be the simple farming towns of a past generation. The people are still farmers, but most of them are no longer farmers only. In the summer they give up the habitable rooms of their old square wooden houses to boarders from the cities, and lurk about in the nooks and crannies of their L's and lean-to's; and, whatever their guests may have to complain of, have hardly the best of the bargains they drive with them. But in this way they eke out the living grudged them by their neglected acres, and keep their houses in a repair that contrasts with the decay of their farming. Each place has its grove of maples, fantastically gnarled and misshapen from the wounds of many sugar seasons; and an apple orchard, commonly almost past bearing with age, stretches its knotted boughs over a slope near the house. Every year the men-folk plow up an area of garden ground, and plant it with those vegetables which, to the boarders still feeding in mid-July on

last year's potatoes and tough, new-butchered beef, seem so reluctant in ripening; but a furrow is hardly turned elsewhere on the farm. It yields a crop of hay about the end of June, in which the boarders' children tumble, and a favorable season may coax from it a few tons of rowen grass. The old stone walls straggle and fall down even along the roadside; in the privacy of the wood lots and berry pastures they abandon themselves to reckless dilapidation.

Many houses in the region stand empty, absently glaring on the passer with their cold windows, as if striving in vain to recall the households, long since gone West, to whom they were once homes. By and by they will drop to ruin; or some shrewd Irishman, who has made four or five hundred dollars in a Massachusetts suburb, will buy one of them, and, stocking the farm with his stout boys and girls, will have the best-looking place about. He thrives where the son of the soil starved; and if the bitter truth must be owned, he seems to deserve his better fortune. He has enterprise and energy and industry, and to the summer boarder, used to the drive and strain of the city, the Yankee farmer often seems to have none of these qualities. It may be that the summer boarder judges him rashly; I dare say he would not be willing himself to take his landlord's farm as a gift, if he must live on those stony hillsides the year round, and find himself at each year's end a year older but not a day nearer the competence to which all men look forward as the just reward of long toil. I always fancied a

dull discouragement in the native farming race; an effect of the terrible winter that drowns a good half of the months in drifts of snow, and of the dreary solitude of the country life. Great men have come from the rural stock in our nation before now; and perhaps the people of West Pekin have earned the right to lie fallow; but whether this is so or not, it is certain that they often evince an aptness to open the mouth and stand agape at unusual encounters, which one cannot well dissociate from ideas of a complete mental repose. If they have no thoughts, they have not the irrelevance and superfluity of words. They are a signally silent race. I have seen two of them, old neighbors, meet after an absence, and when they had hornily rattled their callous palms together, stand staring at each other, their dry, serrated lips falling apart, their jaws mutely working up and down, their pale-blue eyes vacantly winking, and their weather-beaten faces as wholly discharged of expression as the gable ends of two barns confronting each other from opposite sides of the road; no figure can portray the grotesqueness of their persons, with their feet thrust into their heavy boots, and their clothes—originally misshapen in a slop-shop after some bygone fashion, and now curiously warped, outgrown, outworn—climbing up their legs and mounting upon their stooping shoulders. But if they are silent they are not surly; give them time and they are amiable enough, and they are first and last honest. They do not ask too much for board, and they show some slow willingness to

act upon a boarder's suggestions for his greater comfort. But otherwise they remain unaffected by the contact. They learn no greater glibness of tongue, or liveliness of mind, or grace of manner; if their city guests bring with them the vices of wine or beer at dinner and tobacco after it, the farmers keep themselves uncontaminate. The only pipe you smell is that of the neighboring Irishman as he passes with his ox-team; the gypsying French Canadians, as they wander southward, tipsy by whole families, in their rickety open buggies, lend the sole bacchanal charm to the prospect that it knows. These are of a race whose indomitable light-heartedness no rigor of climate has appalled, whereas our Anglo-Saxon stock in many country neighborhoods of New England seems weather-beaten in mind as in face; and this may account for the greater quick-wittedness of the women, whose indoor life is more protected from the inclemency of our skies. It is certain that they are far readier than the men, more intelligent, gracious, and graceful, and with their able connivance the farmer stays the adversity creeping upon his class, if he does not retrieve its old prosperity. In the winter his daughters teach school, and in the summer they help their mother through her enterprise of taking boarders. The farm feeds them all, but from the women's labor comes thrice the ready money that the land ever yields, and it is they who keep alive the sense of all higher and finer things, Heaven knows with what heroic patience and devoted endeavor. The house shines, through

them, with fresh paper and paint; year by year they add to those comforts and meek aspirations toward luxury which the summer guest accepts so lightly when he comes, smiling askance at the parlor organ in the corner, and the black-walnut-framed chromo-lithographs on the walls.

Nehemiah Woodward left West Pekin in his youth, after his preparation in the academy, which still rests its classic pediment upon a pair of fluted pine pillars above the village green, and went to Andover, where he studied divinity and married his landlady's daughter. She was a still, somewhat austere girl, and she had spread no lures for the affections of her lover, who was of tenderer years than herself; he was not her first love; perhaps he was at last rather her duty, or her importuning fate. In any case she did not deny him in the end; they were married after his ordination and went away to the parish in New York State over which he was settled, and she left behind her the grave in which the hopes of her youth were buried. The young minister knew about it; she told him everything when he first spoke to her of marriage; they went together to bid farewell to the last resting place of the dead rival whom he had never seen; and his sublime generosity touched her heart with a lifelong gratitude.

It was his only inspiration, poor soul! he was a dreadfully dull man—too dull even for the inarticulate suffering of country congregations. Parish after parish shifted him from its aching shoulders;

they loved him for his goodness, but they could not endure him, they hardly knew why; it was really because his sermons were of lead, and finally none the lighter that they were beaten out so thin. He had thus worn westward, leaving a deeply striated human surface behind him, in the line of the New England emigration, as far as to the farther border of Iowa, and he was an elderly man with a half-grown family, when his father died and left the ancestral farm at West Pekin, to which none of the other sons would return from their prosperity in the neighboring towns or the new countries where they had settled. But it was not a fortune that Nehemiah could refuse; possibly he had always had his own secret yearnings for those barren pastures of his boyhood; at any rate, he gladly parted from his last willing parish and went back to the farm. Once returned, he seemed never to have been away; he looked as much a fixture of the landscape as any outbuilding of the place. He quickly shed whatever clerical dignity had belonged to his outward man, and slouched into the rusty boots and scarecrow coats and hats that costume our farmers at their work, as easily as if he had only laid them off overnight. The physical shape of the farm was favorable to his luckless gift of going downhill, but the energy of his wife now stayed his further descent as effectually as if he had been a log propped on the edge of a slope by some jutting point of granite. She had indeed always done more than her half toward keeping her family's souls and bodies together; now, with a lasting basis to work upon,

she took the share on which Nehemiah's lax hold had faltered. The house was built with the substantial handsomeness which a farmer could afford who two generations ago sent his boys to the academy. It was large and square, with ample halls crossing each other from side to side, and dividing it into four spacious rooms below and answering chambers overhead, some of which, after a season or two of summer boarders, Mrs. Woodward was able to cut in two and still leave large enough for single beds. In time a series of very habitable chambers grew out over the one-story wing; a broad new piazza invited the breeze and shade around two sides of the house, from whose hilltop perch you could look out over a sea of rolling fields and woods, steeply shored on the south by the long flank of Scatticong Mountain. The air was a luxury, the water was delicious; the walks and drives through the white-birch groves were lovely beyond compare; and long before the summer of which I write, the fame of Mrs. Woodward's abundant table and educated kitchen had made it a privilege to be her boarders for which people endeavored by engaging her rooms a year beforehand. Whoever abode there reported it a house flowing with unstinted cream and eggs; peas, beans, squash, and sweet corn in their season, of a flavor that the green grocery never knew; blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, after their kind; and bread with whose just praise one must hesitate to tax the credulity of one's hearer.

Mrs. Woodward not only knew how to serve her

guests well, but how to profit by serving them well. She made it her business, and mixed no sentiment of any sort with it. She abolished herself socially and none of her boarders offered her slight at the point to which she retreated from association with them. She left them perfect freedom in the house, but she kept them rigidly distinct from her own family, whom she devoted each in his or her way to the enterprise she had undertaken. The family ate at their own table, and never appeared in the guests' quarter except upon some affair connected with their comfort; but they were all willing in serving. Even Nehemiah himself, under the discipline centering in his wife, showed a sort of stiff-jointed readiness in hitching up the horse for the ladies when the boys happened to be out of the way; and he had thus late in life discovered a genius for gardening. It was to his skill and industry that the table owed its luxury of vegetables; and he was wont to walk out at twilight, and stand, bent-kneed and motionless, among the potatoes, and look steadfastly upon the peas, in serene emulation of the simulacrum posted in a like attitude in another part of the patch. He was the most approachable member of the family, and would willingly have talked with one, no doubt, if he could have found anything in the world to say. The others were civil, but invisibly held aloof by the mother's theory of business, or secret pride, which, whatever it was, interfered with no one's rights or pleasures, and so was generally accepted by amiable newcomers after a few good-natured attempts to overcome it. There

was only one of them who had succeeded in breaking the circle of this reserve, and her intimacy with the Woodwards seemed rather another of her oddities than anything characteristic of them.

The household of the boarders displayed that disparity between the sexes which is one of the sad problems of the New England civilization, and perhaps enforced it a little more poignantly than was just. They were not all single ladies; a good third of the fifteen were married; of the rest, some were yet too young to think or to despair of marrying, and it could not be confidently said of others that they wished to change their state. Nevertheless, one's first sense of their condition was vaguely compassionate. It seemed a pity that for six days in the week they should have to talk to one another and dress only for their own sex. Not that their toilettes were elaborate; they all said that they liked to come to the Woodwards' because you did not have to dress there, but could go about just as you pleased; yet, having the taste of all American women in dress, they could not forbear making themselves look charming, and were always appearing in some surprising freshness and fragrance of linen, or some gayety of flannel walking costume. The same number of men would have lapsed into unshaven chins and unblacked boots in a single week; but these devoted women had their pretty looks on their consciences, and never failed to honor them. Some of them even wore flowers in their hair at dinner—Heaven knows why; and the young girls were always coming home from the woods

with nodding plumes of bracken in their hats, and walking out in the dusk with coquettish headgear on, to be seen by no one more important than some barefooted, half-grown, bashful farm boy driving home his cows. The mothers started their children out every morning in clean, whole clothes, and patiently put aside at night the grass-stained, battered, dusty, dishonored fragments. Even one or two old ladies who were there for the country air were zealous to be neatly capped. The common sentiment seemed to be that as you never knew what might happen, you ought to be prepared for it. What actually happened was the occasional arrival of the stage with an express package for one of the boarders, and a passenger for some farmhouse beyond, who at very rare and exciting intervals was a man. Once a day the young ladies went down to the village after the mail, and indulged themselves with the spectacle of gentlemen dismounting from the stage at the hotel, which at such moments poured forth on piazza and gallery a disheartening force of lady boarders. Regularly, also, at ten o'clock on Saturday night, when everybody had gone to bed, this conveyance drove up to the door of the farmhouse, and set down the five husbands of five of the married ladies, for whom it called again on Monday morning, before anybody was up. These husbands were almost as unfailing as the fish-balls at the Sunday breakfast; and when any one of them was kept in Boston it made a great talk; his wife had got word from him why he could not come; or she had not got word: it was just as ex-

citing in either case. The ladies all made some attractive difference in their dress, which the wives when they went to their rooms asked the husbands if they had noticed, and which the husbands had not noticed, to a man. After breakfast, each husband took by the hand the child or two which his wife had scantly provided him (a family of four children was thought pitiably large, and a marvel of responsibility to the mother), and went off to the woods, whence he returned an hour before dinner, and read the evening papers which he had brought up in his pocket. In the afternoon he was reported asleep, being fatigued by the ride from town the day before, or he sat and smoked, or sometimes went driving with his family. His voice as the household heard it next morning at dawn had a gayer note than at any other time in the last thirty-eight hours, and his wife, coming down to breakfast, met the regulation jest about her renewed widowhood with a cheerfulness that was apparently sincere.

It may not have been so dull a life for the ladies as men would flatter themselves; they all seemed to like it, and not a woman among them was eager to get back to her own house and its cares. Perhaps the remembrance of these cares was the secret of her present content; perhaps women, when remanded to a comparatively natural state, are more easily satisfied then men. It is certain that they are always enduring extremes of ennui that appear intolerable to the other sex. Here at Woodward farm they had their own little world, which I dare say was all the better and kindlier for being their own.

They were very kind to one another, but preferences and friendships necessarily formed themselves. Certain ladies were habitually visiting, as they called it, in one another's rooms, and one lady on the ground floor was of a hospitable genius that invited the other boarders to make her room the common lounging and gossiping place. Whoever went in or out stopped there; and the mail, when it was brought from the post-office, was distributed and mostly read and talked over, there.

Till a bed was put into the parlor, one of the young ladies used to play a very little on the organ after breakfast on rainy days. One of the married ladies, who had no children, painted; she painted cat-tail rushes, generally; not very like, and yet plainly recognizable. Another embroidered; she sat with her work in the wide doorway, and those passing her used to stop and take up one edge of it as it hung from her fingers, and talk very seriously about it, and tell what they had seen of the kind. Some of them were always writing letters; two or three had a special gift of sleep, both before and after dinner, which distinguished them from several nervous ladies, who *never* could sleep in the daytime. The young girls went up the mountain a good deal whenever they could join a party; twice when one of their brothers came from the city they camped out on the mountain; it was a great thing to see their camp fire after dusk; once they came home in a rain, and that was talk for two days, and always a joke afterward. They had a lot of novels, not very new to our generation, which they read

aloud to one another sometimes; they began to write a novel of their own, each contributing a chapter, but I believe they never finished it; the youngest kept a journal, but she did not write in it much. She could also drive; and her timid elders who rode out with her said they felt almost as safe with her as with a man. All the ladies said that the air was doing them a great deal of good, and, if not, that the complete rest was everything; none of them had that wornout feeling with which she had come; if any did not pick up at once, she was told that she would see the change when she got home in the fall. Two or three, in the meantime, were nearly always sick in bed, or kept from meals by headache. From time to time the well ones had themselves weighed at the village store, to know whether they had gained or lost. They all talked together a good deal about their complaints, of which, whether they were sick or well, they each had several.

These were the interests and occupations, this the life, at Woodward farm, to the entire simplicity of which I am afraid I have not done justice, when a thing happened that complicated the situation and for the moment robbed it of its characteristic repose. It appears that while Mrs. Stevenson was quietly multiplying cat-tail rushes in her cool, airy, upstairs room, one of the Woodward girls, who taught school and in vacation waited on the boarders at the table, had also been employed—somewhere in the mysterious L part, where her family bestowed itself—on a work of art, a head of the Alderney cow known to the whole household

as Blossom. Whether it was ever meant to be seen or not is scarcely certain; that lady who alone had the intimacy of the Woodwards came out with it from the kitchen one morning, as by violence, and showed it to the boarders after breakfast, while they still loitered at the table, none of the artist's kindred appearing. They all recognized Blossom in a moment, but the exhibitor let them suffer and guess awhile who did it. Then she exploded the fact upon them, and the excitement began to rise. They said that it was a real Rosa Bonheur; and Mrs. Stevenson, who was indeed in another line of art and need feel no envy, set her head on one side, held the picture at arm's length in different lights, and pronounced it perfect, simply perfect, for a charcoal sketch. They had looked at it in a group; now they looked at it singly and from a distance, cautioning one another that the least touch would ruin it. Then they began to ask the exhibitress if she had known of Miss Woodward's gift before, the young girls listening to her replies with something of the zeal and reverence they felt for the artist. At last they said Mrs. Gilbert must see it, and followed it in procession to the room of the public-spirited lady on the first floor. She had been having her breakfast in bed, and now sat in a beruffled, sweet-scented dishabille, which became her pale, middle-aged, invalid good looks—her French-marquise effect, one young girl called it, Mrs. Gilbert's hair being quite gray, and her thick eyebrows dark, like those of a powdered old-regime beauty. They set the drawing on her chimney-

piece, and she considered it a long while with her hands lying in her lap. "Yes," she sighed at last, "it's very fair indeed, poor thing."

"Blossom or Rachel, Mrs. Gilbert?" promptly demanded the lady who had been chaperoning the picture, with a tremor of humorous appreciation at the corners of her mouth, and a quick glance of her very dark-brown eyes.

"Rachel," answered Mrs. Gilbert. "Blossom is a blessed cow. But a woman of genius in a New England farmhouse where they take summer boarders—oh dear me! Yes, it's quite as bad as that, I should say," she added, thoughtfully, after another stare at the picture.

"Quite."

The company had settled and perched and poised upon the different pieces of furniture, as if they expected Mrs. Gilbert to go on talking; but she seemed to be out of the mood, and chose rather to listen to their applauses of the picture. The sum of their kindly feeling appeared to be that something must be done to encourage Miss Woodward, but they were not certain how she ought to be encouraged, and they began to stray away from the subject before anything was concluded. When the surprise had been drained to the dregs, a natural reaction began, and they left Mrs. Gilbert somewhat sooner than usual and with signs of fatigue. Presently no one remained but the lady who had exhibited the picture; her, as she made a movement to take it from the mantel, Mrs. Gilbert stopped, and began to ask about the artistic history of Miss Woodward.

Chapter II

MRS. BELLE FARRELL, one of the summer boarders, stood waiting at the side of the road for Rachel Woodward, who presently appeared on the threshold of the red schoolhouse, with several books on her arm. It was Saturday afternoon; her school term had ended the day before, and she had returned now for some property of hers left in the schoolhouse overnight. She laid down the books while she locked the door and put the key in her pocket, and then she gathered them up and moved somewhat languidly toward Mrs. Farrell. This lady was slender enough to seem of greater height than she really was, but not slender enough to look meager, and she wore a stuff that clung to her shape, and, without defining it too statuesquely, brought out all its stylishness. Her dress was not so well suited to walking along country roads as it was to some pretty effects of pose; caught with the left hand, and drawn tightly across from behind, its plaited folds expanded about Mrs. Farrell's feet, and as she turned her head for a sidelong glance at her skirt it made her look like a lady on a Japanese fan. The resemblance was heightened by Mrs. Farrell's brunette coloring of dusky red and white, and very dark eyes and hair; but for the rest her features

were too regular; she knitted her level brows under a forehead overhung with loose hair like a French painter's fancy of a Roman girl of the decadence, and she was not a Buddhist half the time. This afternoon, for example, she had in the hand with which she swept her skirt forward, a very charming little English copy of Keble's *Christian Year*, in mouse-colored, flexible leather, with red edges. It was a book that she had carried a good deal that summer.

She now looked up and down the road, and, seeing no one but Rachel, she undid her attitude and pinned her draperies courageously out of the way. "Let us go home through the berry pasture," she said, and at the same time she stepped out toward the bars of the meadow with a stride that showed the elastic beauty of her ankles and the neat fit of her stout walking shoes; she mounted and was over before the country girl could let down one of the bars and creep through. In spite of Mrs. Farrell's stylishness, the pasture and she seemed joyously to accept each other as parts of nature; as she now lounged over the tough, springy knolls and leaped from one gray-lichened rock to another, and glided in and out of the sun-shotten clumps of white birches, she suggested a well-millinered wood nymph not the least afraid of satyrs; she suffered herself to whistle fragments of opera as she stooped from time to time and examined the low bushes to see if there were any ripe berries yet. Such as she found she ate with a frank, natural, charming greed; but there were not many of them.

"We shall have to stick to custard pie for another

week," she said; "I'm glad it's so good. Don't let's go home at once, Rachel. Sit down and have a talk, and I'll help you through afterward, or get you out of the trouble somehow. Halt!" she commanded.

The girl showed a conscientious hesitation, while Mrs. Farrell sank down at the base of a bowlder on which the sunset had been shining. The day was one of that freshness which comes often enough to the New England hills even late in July; Mrs. Farrell leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head, and closed her eyes in luxury. "Oh, you nice old rock, you! How warm you are to a person's back!"

Rachel crouched somewhat primly near her, with her books on her knee, and glanced with a slight anxiety at the freedom of Mrs. Farrell's self-disposition, whose signal grace might well have justified its own daring.

"Rachel," said Mrs. Farrell, subtly interpreting her expression, "you're almost as modest as a man; I'm always putting you to the blush. There, will that do any better?" she asked, modifying her posture. She gazed into the young girl's face with a caricatured prudery, and Rachel colored faintly and smiled.

"Perhaps I wasn't thinking what you thought," she said.

"Oh yes, you were, you sly thing; don't try to deceive my youth and inexperience. I suppose you're glad your school's over for the summer, Rachel."

"I don't know. Yes, I'm glad; it's hard work. I shall have a change, at least, helping about home."

"What shall you do?"

"I suppose I shall wait on table."

"Well, then, you shall *not*. I'll arrange *that* with your mother, anyway. I'll wait on table myself, first."

"I don't see what difference it makes whether I work for the boarders in the kitchen or wait on them at the table."

"It makes a great difference: you can't be bidden by them if you're not in the way, and I'm not going to have a woman of genius asking common clay if it will take some more of the hash or another help of pie in *my* presence. Yes, I say *genius*, Rachel; and Mrs. Gilbert said so, too," cried Mrs. Farrell, at some signs in the girl, who seemed a little impatient of the subject, as of something already talked over; "and I'm proud of having been in the secret of it. I never *shall* forget how they all looked when I came dancing out with it and stood it up at the head of the table, where they could see it! They thought I did it, and they had quite a revulsion of feeling when they found it was yours. Where are you going, Rachel? To Florence, or the Cooper Institute, or Doctor Rimmer?"

"I have no idea of going anywhere. I have no money; father couldn't afford to send me. I don't expect to leave home."

"Well, then, I'll tell you: you must. Why can't you come and stay with me in Boston, this winter? I've got two rooms, and money enough to keep a

couple of mice—especially if one's a country mouse —and we'll study art together. I might as well do that as anything—or nothing. Come, is it a bargain?"

"If I could get the money to pay for my boarding, I think I should like it very much. But I couldn't," answered Rachel, quietly.

"Why, Rachel, can't you understand that you are to be my guest?"

Even the women of West Pekin are slow to melt in gratitude, and Rachel replied without effusion:

"Did you mean that? It is very good of you— but I could never think of it," she added, firmly. "I never could pay you back in any way. It would come to a great deal in a winter—city board."

"Do I understand you to refuse this handsome offer, Rachel?"

"I must."

"All right. Then I shall certainly count upon your being with me, for it would be foolish not to come, and whatever you are, Rachel, you're not foolish. I'm going to talk with your mother about it. Why, you little—chipmunk," cried Mrs. Farrell, adding the term of endearment after some hesitation for the precise expression, "I want you to come and do me credit. When your things are on exhibition at Williams and Everett's, and Doll and Richards's, I'm going to gather a few small spears of glory for myself by slyly telling round that *I* gave you your first instruction, and kept you from blushing unseen in West Pekin. I've felt the want of a protégée a good while, and here you are,

just made to my hand. I heard before I came away that they were going to get up a life class next winter. Perhaps we could get a chance to join that."

"Life class?"

"Yes; to draw from the nude, you know."

"From the—" Rachel hesitated.

"Yes, yes, yes! my wild-wood flower. From the human being, the fellow-creature, with as little *on* as possible," shouted Mrs. Farrell. "How can you learn the figure any other way?"

A puzzled, painful look came into the girl's eyes, and "Do—do—ladies go?" she asked, faintly.

"Of *course* they go!" said Mrs. Farrell. "It's a regular part of art-education. The ladies have separate classes in New York; but they don't abroad."

Rachel seemed at a loss what to answer. She dropped her eyes under Mrs. Farrell's scrutiny, and softly plucked at a tuft of grass. At last she said, without looking up, "It wouldn't be necessary for me to go. I only want to paint animals."

"Well, and aren't *men* animals?" demanded Mrs. Farrell, leaning forward and trying to turn the girl about so as to look into her averted face.

"Don't!" said the other, in a wounded tone.

"Rachel, Rachel!" cried Mrs. Farrell, tenderly, "I've really shocked you, haven't I? Don't be mad at me, my little girl: *I* didn't invent the life class, and I never went to one. I don't know whether it's exactly nice or not. I suppose people wouldn't do it if it wasn't. Come, look round at me, Rachel: I'm so glad of your liking me that if

you stop it for half a second you'll break my heart!" She spoke in tones of anxious appeal, and then suddenly added, "If you'll visit me this winter we won't go to the life class; we'll sleep together in the parlor and keep a cow in the back room."

Rachel gave way to a laugh, with her face hidden in her hands, and Mrs. Farrell fell back, satisfied, against her comfortable rock again, and put her hand in her pocket. "Look here, Rachel," she said, drawing it out. "Here's something of yours." She tossed a crisp, rattling ten-dollar note into the girl's lap, and nodded as Rachel turned a face of question upon her. I sold your Blossom for that this morning; I forgot to tell you before. No, ma'am; I didn't buy it. Mrs. Gilbert bought it. The others praised it, Mrs. Gilbert paid for it: that's Mrs. Gilbert. I told her something about you and how you owed everything to my instruction, and she offered ten dollars for Blossom. I tried to beat her down to five," she continued, while Rachel stared dumbly at the money, "but it was no use. She wouldn't fall a cent. She . . . Ugh! What's that?" cried Mrs. Farrell.

She gathered her dispersed picturesqueness hastily up, threw her head alertly round, and confronted a mild-faced cow, placidly pausing twenty paces off under the bough of a tree, through which she had advanced her visage, and softly regarding them with her gentle brown eyes. "Why, Blossom, Blossom!" complained the lady. "How could you come up in that startling way? I thought it was a man! Though of course," she added, less dramatically,

"I might have remembered that there isn't a man within a hundred miles."

She was about to lean back again in her lazy posture, when voices made themselves heard from the wood beside the pasture out of which Blossom had emerged. "Men's voices, Rachel!" she whispered. "An adventure! I suppose we must run away from it!"

Mrs. Farrell struggled up from her sitting posture, and, entangling her foot in her skirt, plunged forward with graceful awkwardness, but did not fall. She caught the pins out of her drapery, and Rachel and she were well on their way to the bars which would let them into the road, when two men emerged from the birch thicket out of which Blossom had appeared. One was tall and dark, with a firm, very dark mustache branching across a full beard. The other was a fair man, with a delicate face; he was slight of frame, and of the middle stature; in his whole bearing there was an expression of tacit resolution, which had also a touch of an indefinable something that one might call fanaticism. Both were city-clad, but very simply and fitly for faring through woods and fields; the dark man wore high boots; he carried a trouting rod, and at his side was a fish basket.

They looked after the two women with eyes that clung charmed to the figure of Mrs. Farrell, as she drifted down the sloping meadow-path.

"Magnificent!" said the dark man, carelessly. "'A daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair!'"

A flush came over the cheek of the other, but he said nothing, while he absently advanced to the rock beside which the women had been sitting, as if that superb shape had drawn him thus far after her. A little book lay there, which he touched with his foot before he saw it. As he stooped to pick it up, Mrs. Farrell stopped fleetly, as a deer stops, and, wheeling round, went rapidly back toward the two men. When Mrs. Farrell advanced upon you, you had a sense of lustrous brown eyes growing and brightening out of space, and then you knew of the airy looseness of the overhanging hair and of the perfection of the face, and last of the sweeping, undulant grace of the divine figure. So she came onward now, fixing her unfrightened, steadfast eyes upon the young man, out of whose face went everything but worship. He took off his hat, and bent forward with a bow, offering the pretty volume, at which he had hardly glanced.

"Thanks," she breathed, and for an instant she relaxed the severe impersonality of her regard, and flooded him with a look. He stood helpless, while she turned and swiftly rejoined her companion, and so he remained standing till she and Rachel had passed through the meadow bars and out of sight.

Then the dark man moved and said, solemnly, "Don't laugh, Easton; you wouldn't like to be seen through, yourself."

"Laugh, Gilbert?" retorted Easton, with a start. "What do you mean? What is there to laugh at?" he demanded.

"Nothing. It was superbly done. It was a stroke of genius in its way."

"I don't understand you," cried Easton.

"Why, you don't suppose she left it here on purpose, and meant one of us to pick it up, so that she could come back and get it from him, and see just what manner of men we were; and—"

"No! I *don't* suppose that."

"Neither do I," said Gilbert, nonchalantly. "I never saw anything more unconscious. Come, let's be going; there's nothing to call her back, now."

He put his hand under the fish basket, and weighed it mechanically, while he used the mass of his uncoupled rod staffwise, and moved away. Easton followed with a bewildered air, at which Gilbert, when he happened to glance round at him, broke into a laugh.

Chapter III

IN the evening Gilbert walked over to Woodward farm from the hotel where he and Easton had stopped that morning, and called on his sister-in-law. He had brought word from her husband in Boston, whom he had gone out of his course to see on his journey up from New York. When she found out that he had been in West Pekin all day, he owned that he had spent the time fishing. "I didn't suppose you'd be in any hurry to hear of Bob's detention; and really, you know, I *came* for the fishing."

"You needn't be so explicit, William," said Mrs. Gilbert. "I'm not vain."

"I was merely apologizing."

"Were you? What luck did you have?"

"The brooks are fished to death. I've had bad enough luck to satisfy even Easton, who had a conscience against fishing, among other things."

"Easton! *Your* Easton? Is Wayne Easton with you?" demanded Mrs. Gilbert, with impetuous interest. "You don't mean it!"

"No, but I say it," answered Gilbert, unperturbed.

"What in the world brought him?" pursued his sister-in-law more guardedly, as if made aware by

some lurking pain that an impetuous interest was not for invalids.

"The ideal of friendship. I happened to say that I was feeling a little out of sorts and was coming up here, and he jumped at the chance to disarrange himself by coming with me. He was illustrating his great principle that New York is the best place to spend the summer, and it cost him something of a struggle to give it up, but he conquered."

"Is he really so queer?"

"He or we. I won't make so bold as to say which."

"Has he still got that remarkable protégé of his on his hands?"

"No; Rogers has given Easton his freedom. He's gone on to a farm, with all Easton's board and lodging, Latin and French, in him. His modest aspiration is finally to manage a market garden."

"What a wicked waste of beneficence!"

"Easton looks at it differently. He says that no one else would ever have given Rogers an education, and that the learning wasn't more thrown away on him than on many, perhaps most, people who are sent to college; learning has to be thrown away somehow. Besides, he economized by sharing his room with Rogers, you know."

"No, I didn't know that. Don't you think that was rather more than Providence required of Mr. Easton?"

"I can't say, Mrs. Gilbert."

"But to take such a hopeless case—so hopelessly common!"

"There are some odd instances of the kind on record. The Christian religion was originally sent to rather a common lot."

"Yes, but Latin wasn't, and French wasn't, and first-class board wasn't. You needn't try to gammon me with that sort of thing, William. I won't stand it."

"Well, I wouldn't, myself. But I thought perhaps a lady might. Why did you put me on the defensive? *I* didn't try to form Rogers, or *re*form him."

"No, but you countenanced your Mr. Easton in it. He ought to have married and supported a wife, instead of risking his money on such a wild venture; it's no better than gambling."

"That's your old hobby, Susan. A man can't always be marrying and supporting a wife. And as for countenancing Easton, if he thought a thing was right, it's very little of my cheek he would want to uphold him."

"Oh, I dare say. That's his insufferable conceit; conscientious people are always *so* conceited! They're always so sure that they know just what is right and wrong. Ugh! I can't endure 'em."

"I don't think Easton's conscientiousness is of that aggravating type, exactly," said Gilbert, with a lazy laugh.

"He has got a good many principles, ready cut and dried, but I should say life in general was something of a puzzler to him. He's one of the wrecks of the war. Easton was peculiarly fitted to go on fighting forever in a sacred cause; he's a born

crusader; and this piping time of peace takes him at a disadvantage. He hates rest, and ease, and all the other nice things; what he wants is some good, disagreeable, lasting form of self-sacrifice: I believe it's a real grief to him that he didn't lose a leg; a couple of amputations would have made him perfectly happy; though of course he would *choose* another war of emancipation, for he wouldn't want to be happy in such a useless way. As it is, he is a wretched castaway on the shores of the Fortunate Isles."

"Why doesn't he do something? Why does he idle away even the contemptible hours of peace and prosperity?"

"He does; he doesn't. He's at work on that book of his, all the time."

"Oh, I don't call that work."

"He makes it work. Even if he went merely to literature for his material, his Contributions to the Annals of Heroism might be a serious labor; but he goes to life for it. He hunts up his heroes in the streets and in the back alleys, in domestic service, in the newspaper offices, in bank parlors, and even in the pulpits: he has a most catholic taste in heroism; he spares neither age, sex, nor condition. I suppose it isn't an idle thing to instruct the world that all the highest dreams of self-devotion and courage and patience are daily realized in our blackguard metropolis: we leave culture and refinement to Boston. And if it were so, it must be allowed that even with a futile object in view, Easton does some incidental good: he half supports about

half of his heroes, and he's always wasting his time and substance in good deeds."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Gilbert, "I can't admire such an eccentric, and you needn't ask me."

"I don't. But this is just what shows the hopeless middlingness of your character. If you were a very much better or a very much worse woman, you *would* admire him immensely."

"Oh, don't talk to me, William! He's a man's man, and that's the end of him. Why didn't you bring him with you to-night?"

"He wouldn't come."

"Did you tell him there were fifteen ladies in the house?"

"It was that very stroke of logic which seemed to settle his mind about it. He *is* a man's man, you're right; he's shyer of your admirable sex than any country boy; it's no use to tell him you're not so dangerous as you look. But even if he hadn't been afraid of your ladies, the force of my argument might have been weakened by the fact of the twenty-five at the hotel. What are the superior inducements of your fifteen?"

"They are all very nice."

"How many?"

"Well, three or four: and none of them are disagreeable."

"Are you going to introduce me?"

"They're in bed now—it's half past eight—and they'd be asleep if it didn't keep them awake to wonder who you are. If you'll come to-morrow I'll introduce you."

"Good! Now I've been pretty satisfactory about Easton, I think—"

"I don't see how you could have said less. Every word was extorted from you."

"What I want to know," continued Gilbert, "is whether the loveliest being in West Pekin, not to say the world, counts among your fair fifteen."

When Mrs. Gilbert married, her husband's youngest brother, William, had come to live with them, his father and mother being dead, and his brothers and sisters preoccupied with their own children. He was not in his teens yet, and she had taken the handsome, dark-eyed, black-headed boy under the fond protection which young married ladies sometimes like to bestow upon pretty boy brothers-in-law. This kindness, at first a little romantic, became, with the process of years that brought her no children of her own, a love more like that of mother and son between them. Her condescension had vastly flattered the handsome lad; as he grew older, she seemed to him the brightest as well as the kindest woman in the world; and now, after a score of years, when the crow was beginning to leave his footprints at the corners of her merry eyes, and she had fallen into that permanent disrepair which seems the destiny of so much youthful strength and spirit among our women, he knew no one whose company was more charming. The tacit compliment of his devotion doubtless touched a woman who was long past compliments in most things; something like health and youth he always seemed to bring back to her

whenever he returned to her from absences that grew longer and longer after her husband removed to Boston—Mrs. Gilbert's native city—and left William to follow his young man's devices in New York. Through all changes and chances she had remained constant to this pet of her early matronhood, now a man past thirty. It was her great affliction that she could not watch over him at that distance in the dangerous and important matter of marriage, for she was both zealous and jealous that he should marry to the utmost advantage that the scant resources of her sex allowed, and it was but a partial consolation that she still had him to be anxious about.

They were sitting together in her hospitable room by the light of a kerosene lamp, with the mosquitoes, which swarm in West Pekin up to the end of July, baffled by window nettings. She rose dramatically, shut the window that opened upon the piazza, and said, "You haven't seen her already! Where?"

"In one of the back pastures."

"I'll never believe it! How did she look? Dark or fair?"

"Dark; Greek; hair fluffy over the forehead; eyes that 'stared on you silent and still, like the eyes in the house of the idols.' I know it was she, for there can't be two of her." Gilbert gave a brief account of their meeting.

"It was, it was," sighed Mrs. Gilbert, tragically. "It was Mrs. Belle Farrell!"

"Mrs?"

"A widow. The most opportunely bereft of women!"

"Susan, you interest me."

"Oh, very likely! So will she. She must be famishing for a flirtation, and it's you she'll bend her devouring eyes upon, for I infer that your Mr. Easton, whatever he is, isn't a flirt."

"Easton? Well, no, I should think he wasn't."

Mrs. Gilbert leaned back, staring with a vacant smile across the room. But directly, as she began to talk of Mrs. Farrell, her eyes lighted up with the enjoyment that women feel in analyzing one of themselves for a man who likes women and knows how to make the due allowances and supply all the skipped details of the process. Gilbert had taken his place in her easy-chair when she shut the window, and she had disposed herself among the cushions and pillows of her lounge; he listened with lazy luxury and a smile of intelligence.

"Yes, she will interest you, William; she interests me, and I don't dislike her as I might if I were a youthful beauty myself. In fact, she fascinates me, and I rather like her, on the whole. And I don't see why I don't approve of her. I don't know anything against her."

Gilbert laughed. "That's rather a damaging thing to say of a lady."

"Yes," answered his sister-in-law, "I wouldn't say it to everybody. But really, it seems odd that one *doesn't* know anything against her. She's very peculiar—for a woman; and I don't know whether her peculiarity comes from her character or from

her circumstances. It's a trying thing to be just the kind of handsome young widow that Mrs. Farrell is in Boston."

Gilbert did not comment audibly, but he lifted his eyebrows, and his sister-in-law went on: "Not but that we approve of youth and beauty as much as any one. In fact, if Mrs. Farrell had simply devoted herself to youth and beauty, and waited for the right man, she could have married again splendidly and been living abroad by this time. But, no! And that's been her ruin."

"She's rather a picturesque ruin—to look at," said Gilbert. "What has she done to desolate herself? What was she when in good repair?"

"Well, that isn't quite so easy to make you understand. Originally she was something in the seafaring line. Her father was a ship's captain, from somewhere in Maine, I believe; and when her mother died, this young lady was left at a tender age with her seafaring father on her hands, and they didn't know what to do with each other. But the paternal pirate had a particular friend in a Mr. Farrell, the merchant who owned most of his vessel, and this Mr. Farrell had the little girl brought up and educated with his half sisters—he was a bachelor and very much their elder. One day the captain came home from a voyage, and was drowned by the capsizing of his sailboat in the bay; I believe that's the death that old sea captains generally die; and this seemed to suggest a new idea to old Mr. Farrell. He thought he would get married, and he observed that the little girl under his charge

was an extremely beautiful young woman, and he fell in love with her, *and* married her—to the disgust of his half sisters, who didn't like her. He was a very respectable old party; Robert knew him quite well in the way of business, but I never saw anything of *her* in society; and if she liked age and respectability, it was all very well, especially as he died pretty soon afterward—I don't know exactly how soon."

"He left her his money, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did; and that's the oddest part of it; there was very little *of* the money, and Mr. Farrell was supposed to be rich. Still, there was enough to have supported her in comfort while she quietly waited for her second husband, if she'd been *content* to wait quietly; and she could easily have kept Mr. Farrell's level in society if she had remained with his family. In fact, she could have risen some notches higher; there are plenty of people who would have been glad of her as a sort of ornamental protégée, don't you know; and if she *had* got a few snubs, it would have done her good. But she wouldn't be patronized and she wouldn't wait quietly."

"Perhaps you've grown to be something of a snob, Susan."

"I know it; I own it. Did I ever deny it? It's the only safe ground for a woman. But Mrs. Farrell preferred to go living on in that demi-semi-Bohemian way—"

"What demi-semi-Bohemian way?"

"Oh, skirmishing round from one shabby-genteel

boarding house to another, and one family hotel to another, and setting up housekeeping in rooms, and studying music at the Conservatory, and taking lessons in all the fine arts, and trying to give parlor readings, and that—and not doing it in earnest, but making a great display and spectacle of it. And so instead of keeping her little income to dress on, and getting invitations to Newport for the summer, she's here in a farmhouse with us old fogies and decayed gentles and cultivated persons of small means. But it's rather odd about Mrs. Farrell. I don't believe she would enjoy herself in society; it has limitations; it doesn't afford her the kind of scope she wants; it doesn't respond with the sort of immediate effects that she likes—at least Boston society doesn't. What Mrs. Belle Farrell wishes to do is something vivid, stunning; and that isn't quite what society smiles upon—in Boston. Besides, society may be very selfish, but it really requires great self-sacrifice, and I don't believe Mrs. Belle Farrell is quite equal to that. Don't you see?"

"Dimly. Did she ever try the Cause of Woman, among her other experiments?"

"Well, *that* requires self-sacrifice, too, in its way; and Mrs. Farrell doesn't like women very much, and she does like men very much; and she couldn't bear to be grotesque in men's eyes. Not that she would *respect* men much, or more than she does women. She's very queer. I suppose she has streaks of genius; just enough to spoil her for human nature's daily food."

"We *do* find genius indigestible—in women," allowed Gilbert, thoughtfully. "But isn't life a little less responsive to her vivid intentions at Woodward farm than it would be anywhere else? Forgive the remark if there seems to be any unpleasant implication in it."

"You've nothing to be forgiven, William. We know we are dull; we glory in our torpidity. But I suppose Mrs. Farrell has had the immense relief, here, of not trying to produce any effect. Consciously, I mean; unconsciously, she never can stop trying it till she's in her grave."

Gilbert, who had leaned forward with interest, in the course of Mrs. Gilbert's tale, now fell back again in his chair, and said: "Oh, I see. You are prejudiced against Mrs. Belle Farrell. You have among you here a woman of extraordinary beauty, who strives in her own fashion after the ideal, who struggles to escape from the stupid round of your cares and duties and proprieties, and you want to hem her in with the same dread and misapprehension that imprison her life in your brutal Boston. She longs for a breath of free mountain air, and you stifle her with your dense social atmosphere. I see it all, plainly enough. You misinterpret that sensitive, generous, proud spirit. But no matter; I shall soon be able to make my own version."

"She'll give you every facility. I have no doubt she's in her room now, preparing little hints and suggestions for your fancy to-morrow. Her dress at breakfast will tell the tale. But you needn't flatter yourself, William, that she'll care for you personally

or individually; it's you in the abstract that will interest her, as a handsome young man that certain effects of posture and drapery and gesture may be tried upon. I should like to know just how she stood and stared when you met her, you two, there in the berry pasture, alone. Did she look magnificently startled, splendidly frightened? The woman wouldn't really have minded meeting a panther."

"I didn't say she was alone."

"So you didn't! Who was with her?"

"Oh, a little thrush of a girl, slim and shy-looking."

"Well, William! You may as well take your Mr. Easton and go back to your New York at once."

"What have I done?"

"Nothing; you have simply exhausted our resources; you have devoured with the same indiscriminate glance our Beauty and our Genius."

"What do you mean?"

"That little thrush of a girl is the Rosa Bonheur of West Pekin."

"Truly? Do I understand that the young lady does horse fairs for a living?"

"Not exactly, or not yet. She is the daughter of our landlady. She teaches school for a living, and last year she waited on table in vacation. I don't know how long she may have been in the habit of doing horse fairs in secret, but she produced her first work in public this morning—or rather Mrs. Farrell did for her; the exhibition was too much for the artist's modesty, and we

had no chance to congratulate her. She had done a head of Blossom, the Alderney cow, in charcoal."

"Was it good?" asked Gilbert, indifferently.

"That was the saddest part of it: if it had been bad, I should have had some hopes of her, but it was really very promising; and it made my heart ache to think of another woman of talent struggling with the world. She would be so much happier if she had no talent. I suppose, now it's out, she'll be obliged by public opinion to take some sort of lessons, and go abroad, and worry commissions out of people. Honestly, don't you think it's a pity, William?"

"It isn't a winning prospect," said Gilbert. "What did you all say and do?"

Mrs. Gilbert relaxed the half seriousness of her face. "Oh, it was a very pretty scene, I can tell you. They brought the sketch into my room after breakfast, with Mrs. Belle Farrell at the head of the procession, and set it down on my mantelpiece, and all crowded round it, and praised it with that enthusiasm for genius which Boston people always feel."

Gilbert smiled insult, and his sister-in-law went on.

"It was really very touching to hear our two youngest girls rave over it in that fresh, worshiping way young Boston girls have; and we have another artist in the house (she paints cat-tail rushes, and has her whole room looking like a swamp) who hailed it with effusion. She said that Miss Wood-

ward's talent was God-given, and ought to be cultivated."

"Of course."

"Then everybody else said so, too, and wondered that they hadn't thought of God-given before Mrs. Stevenson did. It seemed to describe it so exactly."

"I see," said Gilbert. "Mrs. Stevenson embodies the average Boston art feeling. How long has she left off chromos? How does her husband like the cat-tails?"

"He thinks they're beautiful and he attributes all sorts of sentiment to them. He's a very good man."

Gilbert laughed aloud. "He must be. What did the Woodward family think of Blossom's head in charcoal?"

"Nobody knows what the Woodward family think of that or of anything else," said Mrs. Gilbert. "I hope they don't despise us, for I respect Mrs. Woodward very much; she has character, and she looks as if she had history; but they draw the line very strictly between themselves and the boarders, all except Mrs. Farrell."

"Ah?" said Gilbert, who had visibly not cared to hear about the Woodwards, "and why except Mrs. Farrell?"

"Well, nobody exactly knows. She thawed their ice, I suppose, by having a typhoid fever here, summer before last, when she first came; they nursed her through it, and did her no end of kindness, and of course that made them fond of her—so perverse is human nature. Besides, I think she

fascinates their straight-up-and-downness by the graceful convolutions of her circuitous character; *that's* human nature, too."

Gilbert laughed again, but did not say anything; and his sister-in-law, after waiting for him to speak, returned to what she had been saying of Rachel Woodward.

"You had better tell Mr. Easton about our artist. He may be on the lookout for another beneficiary, now Rogers is gone, and would like her for a protégée. If some one could only marry her, poor girl, and put her out of her misery in that way! As it stands, it's a truly deplorable case."

"I'm sorry you still think so meanly of woman, Susan," said Gilbert, rising.

"Yes, it *is* sorrowful; but it's an old story to you. I take my cue from Nature; she never loses an occasion to show her contempt for us; she knows us so well. Do you see anything hopeful in Miss Woodward's predicament?"

"I'm a man. If I were a woman I would never go back on my sex."

"Oh, you can't tell; a man can have no idea how very little women think of one another. Is Robert really so very busy? I don't blame him for finding a substitute for West Pekin when he can; but I do blame him for trying to spare my feelings now, when he hasn't been here but twice this summer. Of course, he hates to come, and I'm going to give him his freedom for the rest of the season."

"I think he'll like it," said Gilbert. He offered his hand for good night, and his sister-in-law allowed

him to go, like a wise invalid who knows her own force and endurance.

Gilbert found Easton waiting for him on the upper gallery of the hotel, which overlooked a deep, broad hollow. At the bottom of this the white mist lay so dense that it filled the space of the valley like a shallow lake, and the clumps of trees stood out of it here and there like little isles. The friends sat looking at the pretty illusion in the silence which friends need not break, and Easton's cigar flashed and darkened in the shadow like the spark of a far-seen revolving light. He often lamented this habit of his in vigorous self-reproach, not chiefly as a thing harmful to himself, but as a public wrong and an oppression to many other people; if any one had asked him to give it up, he would gladly have done so; but no one did, and he clung to his cigar with a constancy which Gilbert, who did not smoke, praised as the saving virtue of his character, the one thing that kept him from being a standing rebuke to humanity.

After a while Easton drew the last shameful solace from his cigar and flung the remaining fragment over the rail. He rose to look after it and see that it set nothing on fire; then he returned to his seat and, clasping his hands outside his knees, said, "I've been thinking over that encounter of ours with that girl to-day, and I believe you are right. She did leave the book there that she might have an excuse to come back and see what we were like."

"Well?"

"And I see no harm in her having done so. We

shouldn't have thought it out of the way in a man; and a woman had as much right to do it. The subterfuge is the only thing; I don't like that, though it was a very frank artifice, and the whole relation of the sexes is a series of subterfuges: it seems to be the design of Nature, who knows what she's about, I dare say. No doubt we should lose a great deal that's very pleasant in life without them."

"There could be no flirting without them," answered Gilbert, "and no lovely Farrells, consequently." Easton turned his face toward him, and Gilbert continued: "Farrell is her name: Mrs. Belle Farrell; she is a widow."

"A widow?" echoed Easton, rather disappointedly.

"Yes," said Gilbert. "I dare say she would be willing to mend the fault. She's passing the summer at the Woodward farm; my sister-in-law has been telling me all about her," he said. He reproduced Mrs. Gilbert's facts and impressions, but in his version it did not seem to be much about her, after all.

Easton rose from his chair and struck a light on his match case, but he absently suffered it to burn out before lighting his cigar. When he had done this a second time he began to walk nervously up and down the gallery.

"It's a face to die for!" he said, half musingly.

"Very well," said Gilbert. "I think Mrs. Farrell would be much pleased to have some one die for her face, and on the whole it would be better than to live for it. But these are abstractions, my dear

fellow; I'm going to bed now; there's no use in being out of sorts if I don't. Good night."

"I'm not—yet awhile," said Easton. "Good night. Are you going over to the farm again in the morning?"

"Yes. Will you go with me?"

"I don't know; I thought I should go to church."

"All right. Very likely the Farrell may be there. But I prefer to chance it at the farm."

Easton did not answer. He struck a third match, and this time lit a cigar. Gilbert went his way, and left him seated on the gallery, looking over into the mist-flooded hollow.

Chapter IV

THEY were at work on the foundations of the First Church in West Pekin when tidings came of the battle of Lexington, and the masons laid down their trowels, and the carpenters their chisels, to take up their flintlocks for the long war then so bravely beginning. After the close of the struggle, it appears that a sufficient number of the parishioners survived to finish the building in all the ugliness of the original design. It stands there yet, a vast, barnlike monument of their devotion, and after the lapse of a hundred years is beginning slowly to clothe itself in the interest which we feel in the quaint where we cannot have the beautiful. Some of the neighboring houses, restored and improved for the accommodation of summer boarders, have the languishing curves of the American version of the French roof, and are here and there blistered with bay windows; and by contrast with these, the uncompromising gables and angular oblongness of the old church acquire a sort of grave merit. There is no folly of portico, or pediment, or pillars; the front and flanks of the edifice are as blank and bare as life in West Pekin, but they are also as honest. It is well built; the inhabitants have, of course, the

tradition that when its timbers were exposed for some modern repairs, the oak was found so hard that you could not drive a nail into it. From time to time its weary expanses of clapboarding are freshened with a coat of white paint, under which whatever picturesque effects time might have bestowed are scrupulously smothered, so that it has not a stain or touch of decay to endear it. Every spring a colony of misguided swallows stucco the eaves with their mud-nests, placed at such regular intervals as to form a cornice of the rude material not displeasing to the eye of the summer boarder; and every spring when their broods are half fledged the sexton mounts to the roof and knocks away such of their nests as he can reach, strewing the ground with the cruel wreck and slaughter. But he is old and purblind, and a fair percentage of the swallows escape his single burst of murderous zeal, to wheel and shriek around the grim edifice all summer long, and to renew their hazardous enterprise another year.

The old church has no other grace than they give it, as it stands staring white on the border of the village green, and sends out over the valleys and uplands the wild, plangent summons of its Sabbath bell. It is not an unmusical note, but it is terrible, and seems always to warn of the judgment day, so that one lounging over the fields or through the woods, or otherwise keeping away from the sermon, must hear it with a shudder of alarm. It is a bell to bring a bird's-nesting boy to his knees; and to the youth of West Pekin in former days I could

imagine it a peculiarly awful sound, which would pursue them through life and in all their wanderings over the sea and land. It could now no longer call many youth to worship, but mostly a thinned and faltering congregation of old men and women responded to its menace, and sparsely scattered themselves among the long rows of pews. The stalwart boys and ambitious, eager girls had emigrated or married out of the town, till now the very graves beside the church received none but aged dead, and the newest stones hardly remembered any one under sixty. From time to time an octogenarian or nonagenarian wearied of his place in the census, and irreparably depopulated West Pekin, to the loud sorrow of the bell, which made haste to number his years to the parish as soon as the breath was out of his body. The few young people who remained in the town after marriage limited their offspring to the fashionable city figures, and the lingering grandsires counted their posterity in the lessening procession which would soon leave the family names entirely to the family tombs. Their frosty heads nodded to the sermon with the involuntary assents of slumber or of palsy, and on the cushions beside them sat their gray wives, ruminating with a pleasant fragrance the Sabbath spray of dill or caraway, unvexed by thoughts of boys disorderly in the back pews or the gallery, or, if tormented by vague apprehensions, awaking to find their fears and boys alike an empty dream.

Even the theology preached them was changed. It was the same faith, no doubt, but it seemed to

be made no longer the personal terror it had been, nor the personal comfort; the good man who addressed them was more wont to dwell upon generalities of reward and punishment, and abstractions in morals and belief, and he could easily have been attainted of a vague liberality, if there had been vigor of faith enough left in his congregation to accuse him. But faith, like all life in West Pekin, had shrunken till one might say it rattled in its shell; and this great empty church seemed all the emptier for the diminution of fixed beliefs as to the condition of sinners in the world to come. A choir and a parlor organ rendered most of the psalms or hymns that the minister gave out, and when the congregation raised its cracked basses and trebles in song, it was doubtless an acceptable sacrifice, but it was not a joyful noise.

In West Pekin no one walks who can drive, even for a short distance; doubtless because of the mud of spring and fall, and the heavy winter snows, which make walking in New England, anywhere off the city pave, a martyrdom, three fourths of the inhospitable year; and Easton watched the church people arrive in their dusty open buggies, which they led, after dismounting, into the long sheds beside the church, hitching their horses in the stalls, there to gnaw the deeply nibbled posts and ineffectually to fight the embattled flies, and exchange faint whinnies and murmurs of disapprobation among themselves.

Easton was standing at the hotel door, dressed with whatever of New York nattiness he had been

able to transport to West Pekin in the small valise he had allowed himself. He was not a man of society in any sense, but he always, upon a fixed principle, kept himself scrupulously tailored, and it would have been a disrespect of which he could not be capable, to appear before the West Pekin congregation in anything but his best. The vehicles straggled slowly up the hill; the bell began to falter in its clamor, and to toll in a dismal *staccato* before it should stop altogether; and now the village people issued from their doors and moved hurriedly across the green to the church. Easton went back for a moment to Gilbert's room, and found his friend, whom he had left in bed, lazily dressing. Gilbert looked at him in the glass, and said, "I'm going over to the farm when I've finished. You'd better come too, after sermon."

"I don't know. Shall you be on the lookout for me?"

"You wouldn't have the courage to hunt me up in that houseful of women? All right. I'll sit on the piazza and watch. I'll expect you." He went on tying his cravat, while the other took his way to church, and entered as the last note of the bell was dying away.

The choir began to sing, and Easton rose with the people and faced the singers. Mrs. Belle Farrell stood singing from the same book with Rachel Woodward, and she cast her regard carelessly over the church, and let her eyes rest upon him with visible recognition.

She was a woman whose presence would have been

magnificent anywhere; here her grace and style and beauty simply annulled all other aspects, and a West Pekin congregation could never have looked so old and thin and pale and awkward. Easton did not know music, and was ignorant that she sang with courageous error. She had a rich voice, from which tragedy would have come ennobled, but she had little tune or time. The subdued country girl at her side sang truer and with wiser art. Rachel was then twenty; her scarcely rounded cheeks had the delicate light and pallor of the true New England type; her hair was rather brown than golden; her eyes serenely gray; and her face, when she closed her lips, composed itself instantly into a somewhat austere quiescence. The girl glanced at Easton in sympathy with her companion—instinctively, perhaps, and perhaps because of some secret touch or push.

The sermon was of the little captive Hebrew maid who remembered the famous cures of leprosy by a prophet of her nation, and was thus a means to the healing of Naaman, her Philistine lord. From this the minister drew the moral that even a poor slave girl was not so lowly but she could do some good; he did not attempt the difficult application to West Pekin conditions. From the sandy desert of his discourse a dim mirage of Oriental fancies rose before Easton, with sterile hills, palms, gleaming lakes, cities, temples of old faith, and priestesses who had the dark still eyes, the loose overshadowing hair, the dusky bloom of Mrs. Farrell; a certain familiarity

in her splendor he accounted for suddenly by remembering a figure and face he had once seen in the chorus of the opera of Nabucco. This was in his mind still when he rose and confronted the Babylonian priestess as she sang the closing hymn in the West Pekin choir.

Without, the July noon had ripened to a perfect mellow heat which the yesterday's chill kept from excess, and over all the world was the unclouded cup of the blue heavens. The village people silently and quickly dispersed to their houses, and the farmers sought their different vehicles under the sheds, while their wives stood about the church door and in a still way talked together; as fast as the carriages came up, each mounted into her own, and drove off, passing Easton as he strolled down the hillside road winding away from the village. The weather was dry, and the dust powdered the reddening blackberries of the wayside and gave a gray tone to the foliage of the drooping elm and birch boughs, and to the branches of the apple trees thrust across the stone walls and fantastically dressed with wisps caught during the week from towering hay wagons. When the road left the open hill slopes and entered a wood, Easton yielded to an easy perch on the stone wall and sat flicking the long, slim wood-plants with his cane. Between the walls the highway was bordered all along with young white birches; some were the bigness round of a girl's waist, and, clasped with the satiny smoothness of their bark, showed a delicate snugness of corsage to which an indwelling dryad might have

given shape; they drooped everywhere about in pretty girlish attitudes; and Easton, whose fancy was at once reverent and rich, as that of an unspoiled young man may be, sat there in a sort of courtship of their beauty, which was all the fresher in him, for he was a life-long cockney, and, so far from sentimentalizing Nature, had hardly an acquaintance with her.

He had started on his stroll with the unconfessed hope that the road might somehow bring him to Woodward farm, and as he walked he had been upbraiding himself for his irresolution, without being able either to turn back or boldly to ask the driver of some passing team his way to the farm. In the joy of this coolness and silence and beauty of the woods his conscience left him at peace, and he lounged upon the broad top of the wall with no desire to do anything but remain there, when a wagon came in sight under the meeting tops of the trees at the crest of the hill, and his heart leaped at what he now knew he had been really waiting for. Yet as it came nearer and nearer he perceived that he had been waiting for it with no motive upon which he could act; and he felt awkwardly unaccounted for where he was. Mrs. Farrell was driving on the front seat, and behind her sat Rachel Woodward with her mother; they all three seemed to be concerned about some part of the equipage: they leaned forward and looked anxiously at the horse, which presently, as they came to a little slope, responded to whatever fears they had by rearing violently and dashing aside into a clump of bushes,

where he stood breathing hoarsely till Easton ran up and took him by the head.

"I don't think you need get out," he said, as the women rose. "It's only something the matter with the holdback." He turned the horse again to the road and began to examine the harness. "That's all," he said; "one side of the holdback is broken, and lets the wagon come on him. If I had a piece of twine— Or, never mind." He took his handkerchief out of his pocket.

"Oh no; don't!" pleaded the eldest of the women. "We sha'n't need it, now. It's uphill all the rest of the way to the house."

But Easton said, "It 'll be safer," and went on to supply the place of the broken strap, while Mrs. Belle Farrell, turning upon Rachel, made a series of faces expressing a mock-heroical gratitude. Suddenly she gave a little shriek as the horse darted off with an ugly spring and lurch. "Oh, do stop him! stop him!" she implored, and Easton had him by the bridle again before her words were spoken.

"Well, Mrs. Woodward," said Mrs. Farrell, excitedly, "*I* should whip that horse."

"No, don't whip him," said the elderly woman. "I don't believe he's to blame; I don't think he was hitched up just right in the first place. The boys said there was something the matter with the harness; but they guessed it would go."

"Very well," answered Mrs. Farrell; "he's your horse, but if he were *mine*, *I* should whip him; that's what *I* should do."

Her eyes lightened as she stooped forward to gather up the reins, which had been twitched out of her hands, and the horse started and panted again, while Easton stood beside him in grave embarrassment. He made several efforts to clear his throat, and then said, huskily, "What do you want me to do? Shall I lead him? I don't know much about horses."

He addressed himself doubtfully to the whole party, but Mrs. Woodward answered: "Won't you please get in alongside of that lady? I shouldn't want he should think he had scared us; and he would, if we let you lead him."

Easton obediently mounted to Mrs. Farrell's side. She was going to offer him the reins, but Mrs. Woodward interposed. "No, you drive, Mrs. Farrell, so long as he behaves;" and the horse now moved tremulously but peaceably off. "We're very much obliged to you for what you've done," she added; and then Easton sat beside Mrs. Farrell, with nothing to do but to finger his cane and study the horse's mood. He glanced shyly at her face; from her silks breathed those intoxicating mysterious odors of the toilette; the light wind blew him the odor of her hair; when by and by the horse began to sadden, under the long uphill strain, into a repentant walk, and she gave him a smart cut with the whip, Easton winced as if he had himself been struck. But the lady paid him very little attention for some time; then, when her anxieties about the horse seemed to have subsided somewhat, she looked him in the face and demanded, "If you

know so little about horses how came you to stop him so well?"

"I don't know," said Easton. "It was rather sudden; I didn't—I had no choice—"

"Oh," exulted Mrs. Farrell, "then if you could have chosen, you'd have let him go dancing on with us. I withdraw *my* gratitude for your kindness. But," she added, owning her recognition of him with a courage he found charming, "I'll thank you again for picking up that little book of mine, yesterday. You certainly might have chosen to let it lie."

Easton, if brought to bay in his shyness, had a desperate sort of laugh, in which he uttered his heart as freely as a child; he set his teeth hard, and while he looked at you with gleaming eyes the laughter gurgled helplessly from his throat. It had a sound that few could hear without liking. It made Mrs. Farrell laugh too, and he began to breathe more freely in the rarefied atmosphere that had at first fluttered his pulses. She spoke from time to time to Mrs. Woodward or Rachel, who, the first excitement over, appeared distinctly to relinquish him to her as part of that summer-boarding world with which they could have only business relations.

They came presently to a turn in the road which brought the farmhouse in sight, and Mrs. Farrell lifted her whip to encourage the horse for the sharper ascent now before him; but she abruptly dropped her hand, and bowed her face on the back of it.

Then very gravely, "I beg your pardon," she

said to Easton, "but I don't know how we are going to account for you to the people in the house. What should you say you were doing here?"

"Upon my word," said Easton, "I don't know."

Mrs. Farrell asked as seriously as before, "Were you going anywhere in particular? Have we taken you out of your way? This is Woodward farm."

"Yes, I know it. I was coming here to find a friend."

"Well, then, you have a choice this time. You can say we were passing you on the way and we gave you a lift; or you can say that you saved us all from destruction and got in to see us safe home. You'd better choose the first; nobody 'll ever believe this horse was running away."

"We won't say anything about it," Easton suggested. "That will be the easiest way."

"Oh, do you think so?" cried Mrs. Farrell. "Wait till you're asked by each of our lady boarders."

They now drove out of the woods and came upon a shelving green in front of the farmhouse. Here, at one side of the door, there were evidences of attempted croquet. The wickets were in the ground and the mallets were scattered about; the balls had rolled downhill into desuetude; there was not a level in West Pekin vast enough for a croquet ground. On the piazza fronting the road were most of the lady boarders; the five regular husbands were also there, and Gilbert, lounging on a step at the feet of his sister-in-law, dressed the balance disordered by the absence of the irregular sixth. He rose in visible amazement to see Easton

arrive in the Woodward wagon at the side of Mrs. Farrell, and walked down to the barn near which she had chosen to stop. The other spectators, penetrated by the sense that something must have happened, ranged themselves in attitudes of expectancy along the edge of the piazza. Mrs. Woodward and Rachel, dismounting, renounced all part in the satisfaction of the public curiosity by entering the house at a side door, but Mrs. Farrell marched, with the two gentlemen beside her, up to where Mrs. Gilbert sat, and gave a succinct statement of the affair, which neither omitted to celebrate Easton's action nor overpraised it. She ended by saying, "I wish you'd be good enough to introduce my preserver, Mrs. Gilbert."

"I will, the very instant I have his acquaintance," replied Mrs. Gilbert. "William!"

"It's my friend Mr. Easton. Easton—present you to Mrs. Gilbert."

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Easton," said Mrs. Gilbert, shaking hands; "you're no stranger. This is Mrs. Farrell, whose life you have just had the pleasure of preserving. Mrs. Farrell, let me introduce Mr. Gilbert, also."

Mrs. Farrell kept her eyes steadily on the gentlemen, and bowed gravely at their names. Then she gathered her skirt into her hand to mount the step, gave them a slight nod, smiled with radiant indifference upon the rest of the company, and disappeared indoors. Mrs. Gilbert made proclamation of the facts to the ladies next her, and casually introduced her guests to two or three who presently

left them to her again, as they went to give themselves the last touches before dinner. Mrs. Gilbert then turned to Easton and said, "Mrs. Farrell ran a very fortunate risk. I don't believe anything less would have brought you here."

"Oh yes," answered Easton, "I was on my way. The only difference is that I rode instead of walking."

"Well, no matter, so you've come. I've been persuading my brother to stay to dinner, and he says *he* will, if *Easton* will. Will you?"

At every word Mrs. Gilbert kept studying Easton's face, which the young man had a trick of half averting from any woman who spoke to him, with fugitive glances at her, from time to time. The light of frank liking for him came into Mrs. Gilbert's eyes when he turned with a sort of hopeless appeal to Gilbert, and then said, "Yes. I shall be very glad to stay."

"You're ever so good to be glad," she said, "but after saving one lady's life, you couldn't do less than dine with another. My brother says you and he are to be at West Pekin for a fortnight. That's very nice; and I hope you'll come here often. We consider *any* gentleman a treat; and the only painful thing about having two brilliant young New Yorkers in West Pekin is that perhaps we can never quite live up to our privileges."

"One of us might go away," said Easton, taking heart to return this easy banter, but speaking with a quick, embarrassed sigh. "Do you think you could live up to the other?"

Mrs. Gilbert smiled her approval of his daring and of his sigh.

"We will make an effort to deserve you both. Has your friend here told you anything about us?"

"How can you ask it, Susan? Did you ever know me to be guilty of such behavior toward you?" demanded Gilbert.

"No, William, I never did; and I must add that it's no fault of yours if I didn't. He means, Mr. Easton, that he's been generous to a little foible of mine. I do like to lecture upon people when I can get a fresh, uncorrupted listener, I won't deny it; and I should have been inconsolable if William had exploited us to you, as he certainly would have done if he had liked to expatiate and expound—which he doesn't; and I believe men never do, however much they like being expatiated and expounded *to*. Well now, as I'm not going to have any partiality shown by any guests of mine, and as I'm going to introduce you to every lady at dinner recollect, you've *promised* to stay—I'm going to give you a little synopsis of each of them. Mrs. Farrell you've already had the pleasure of meeting; once in the berry pasture, yesterday afternoon, and once this morning when you saved her life—yes, her life; I insist upon giving the adventure a decent magnitude, and I will listen to no mannish, minifying scruples—saved her *life;* and so I will only say that she is young, beautiful, and singularly attractive. The absence of any perceptible husband does not necessarily imply that she is a widow; though in this case it *does* happen that Mrs. Far-

rell *is* a *widow*. Have I got the logical sequences all right, William? Yes? Well, I'm glad of that; not that I care the least for them, but I like to consult the weakness of a sex that can't reason without them. As I was saying, she is young, beautiful, and attractive; the fact might not strike you at first, but she is. The only drawback is her *extreme unconsciousness*. But for all that, if I were a man, I should simply go raving distracted over Mrs. Belle Farrell."

"I won't speak for Easton," said Gilbert, "but I think men generally prefer a spice of coquetry in the objects of their raving distraction. This simplicity, this excessive singleness of motive—it doesn't wear well."

Mrs. Gilbert owned, "It does render one *forgetful* and *liable to accidents*, but it isn't the worst fault. You gentlemen are very exacting; I see that you're bent upon decrying every one of our ladies, whatever I say of them, and I believe I shall leave you to form your own perverse opinions. Yes, I've changed my mind, Mr. Easton, and instead of lecturing you on them beforehand, I shall confine myself to satisfying any curiosity you may happen to feel about them when you've seen them. Isn't that the way a man would do?"

"Perhaps," answered Easton. "But he wouldn't like it—in a woman."

"I dare say. That's his tyrannical unreasonableness. What was the sermon about this morning? Mrs. Belle Farrell?"

It was impossible not to enjoy the mock innocence

with which Mrs. Gilbert put this question. Easton's eyes responded to the fun of it, while his blushes came and went, and he kept thrusting his cane into the turf where he stood, just below the step on which she sat. She went on: "We seldom go to church from the farm; we come to the country to enjoy ourselves. Mrs. Farrell goes, and sings in the choir, I think. Some of us went to hear her sing once, and came home perfectly satisfied. She's a great friend of young Miss Woodward's, and is the only boarder admitted into the landlord's family on terms of social equality. The regime at Woodward farm is very peculiar, Mr. Easton, and will form the topic of a future discourse. I shall also want to inquire your views of the best method of extinguishing talent in the industrial classes; I believe you've experimented in that way." Easton lifted his downcast face and looked at Gilbert with a queer alarm that afforded Mrs. Gilbert visible joy. "Miss Woodward is the victim of a capacity, lately developed, for drawing; your friend Mrs. Farrell has fostered this abnormal condition, and it is the part of humanity to stop it. Now perhaps your experience with Mr. Rogers—"

The dinner bell sounded as Mrs. Gilbert reached forward and appealingly touched Easton's arm with her fan; and she stopped.

"Go on," said Gilbert; "you might as well have your say out now, if there's anything left on your mind. Easton's made up *his* mind to renounce me, and you can't do me any more harm."

"Stuff! Mr. Easton and I understand each

other, and we know well enough that you haven't been disloyal to him. At least we won't believe it on the insinuation of a malicious, backbiting old woman; if Mr. Easton has any doubts of you, I'll teach him better. Come, it's dinner. This is a great day with us: we have our first string-beans, to-day; that's one of the reasons why I asked you to stop."

Chapter V

MRS. GILBERT kept her word, and presented the young men to each of the boarders; but for all that, the talk did not become general. After dinner she went off for a nap, and the young men both followed Mrs. Farrell to the piazza, where they seemed to forget that there was anyone else. She was very amiable to both, but a little meek and subdued in her manner; if she encouraged one more than the other, it was Gilbert. She was disposed to talk of serious things, and said that one could not realize the New England Sabbath in town as one could in the country; that here in these hills the stillness, the repose, seemed to have something almost holy about it. Two young girls in gay flannel walking skirts and branching shade hats passed Mrs. Farrell where she sat with her court, and she who passed nearest dropped a demure glance out of the corner of her eye, and a demurely arch "good-by" from the corner of her mouth.

"What for?" asked Mrs. Farrell, breaking abruptly from her pensive mood.

"Those brakes," said the girl over her shoulder, having now got by.

"Oh, come! Won't you go, too?" cried Mrs. Far-

rell. "It's an old engagement. Wait, please!" she called to the girls, and ran in to get her hat, while they loitered down the path.

Gilbert walked forward to join them, and Easton stayed for Mrs. Farrell, who delayed a little, and then came out in walking-gear which had the advantage over the dresses of the young girls that foliage or plumage has over dress always—it seemed part of her.

"If you'll be so kind—yes," she said, giving Easton her light shawl, while she fitted her hat cord under the knot of her hair. "It's a little coolish sometimes in the deep woods, and it's best to bring one. Don't you think," she asked, dazzling him with the radiant, immortal youth of her glance and smile, "that the worst thing about growing older is that you have to be so careful about your miserable, perishable body? I hope I've not made you do anything against your principles, Mr. Easton, in getting you to go with me after brakes on Sunday? We don't often do such things, ourselves."

"No," said Easton; "unfortunately, I have no principles on that point. I suppose it's a thing to be regretted."

"Oh yes, indeed!" said Mrs. Farrell, earnestly. "I think one ought always to be one thing or the other. I find nothing so wretched as this sort of betwixt-and-betweenity that most people live in nowadays; and I envy Rachel Woodward her fixed habits of religious observance. I wish she could have gone with us this afternoon; but the Woodwards never do. You must get acquainted with her,

Mr. Easton. She's a splendid girl; she has a great deal of talent and a great deal of character; more than all of us lady boarders put together—except Mrs. Gilbert, of course."

It vaguely troubled Easton, he did not know why, to have her talk of Rachel Woodward; at that moment it vexed him that there should be any other woman in the world than herself. But he contrived to say that Mrs. Gilbert had mentioned Miss Woodward's talent for drawing.

"Isn't she nice—Mrs. Gilbert?" asked Mrs. Farrell, looking into Easton's face, and no doubt seeing there a consciousness of his having heard from Mrs. Gilbert something not to her advantage. "She's the only one of our boarders that one cares to talk with; she's such a humorous old thing that I like to hear her even when I know she's looking me through and through. She's a very keen observer, and such a wonderful judge of character! Don't you think so?"

"I hardly know; I'm scarcely acquainted with her or the people she talks about."

"To be sure. But then, I think you can often see whether a person understands people, even if you don't know any of them."

"Oh yes—yes," answered Easton.

They had crossed the road from the farmhouse and, traversing some sloping meadows, were at the border of the wood in which the tall brakes grew, with delicate shapes of fern slowly waving and swaying in the breeze. He was offering her his hand to help her over the wall into the wood, and

she was throwing half her elastic weight upon his happy arm. Gilbert and the young girls were far ahead among the brakes, which their movement tossed about them with a continual, gracious rise and fall of the stately plumes, the bright colors of the girls' dresses deepening their tint as they glimmered through the undulant greenery.

"How lovely!" cried Mrs. Farrell. She chose to sit still a moment on the wall. "And isn't your friend superb in his white flannel and his planterish-looking hat? When I was a little girl I was traveling with my father on the Mississippi, and one night a New Orleans boat landed alongside of us. The most that I can remember is those iron baskets of burning pine-knots they stick into the shore, and the slim, dark young Southerners, in white linen from head to foot, as they came on and off the boat in the red light. I felt then that I never could marry anybody but a young Southerner in white linen. Your friend reminds me of them. But he isn't Southern?"

"No; he was South before the war, awhile, and he tried a cotton plantation after the war; but he's a New-Yorker."

"How picturesque he is!" sighed Mrs. Farrell. "Was he a soldier?"

"Yes. He's Major Gilbert, if you like."

"Was that where you met him, in the army?"

"Yes."

"And were you a major, too?"

"I went in as a private," said Easton.

"But you didn't come out a private?"

"Our regiment suffered a great deal, and the promotions were pretty rapid."

"And so you came out a captain?"

"Not exactly."

"A major—a colonel?"

"I couldn't very well help it."

"Oh, I dare say you're not to blame!" cried Mrs. Farrell. "You and Mr.—Major Gilbert, were you in the same regiment?"

"Yes. I owed my first commission to his interest. He was my captain before I got my company."

"Well, how was it, then, that you came out a colonel and he only came out a major?" asked Mrs. Farrell, innocently.

Easton turned about and looked after the others, whose voices, in talk and laughter, came over the bracken with a light, hollow sound that voices have in the woods.

"Oh, don't snub me!" implored Mrs. Farrell; "I didn't mean to ask anything wrong. You soldiers are always so queer about the war; one would think you were ashamed of it."

"It was full of unjust chances," answered Easton, almost fiercely. "All that I did Gilbert would have done better, and if he had done it he would have got the promotion that I got. I ought to have refused it; it's my lasting shame and sorrow that I didn't." A look of strange dismay and of self-contempt came into Easton's face with the last words, which sounded like the expression of an old remorse.

"Oh, excuse me!" said Mrs. Farrell with a quick sympathy of tone. "I've made you talk of something—I didn't think—your men's friendships are so much more tenderly brought up than women's, that a woman can scarcely understand," she added, a little mockingly; but she made obvious haste to get away from the subject that annoyed him.

"Here are tall enough brakes," she said, "if it's tallness we're after; but I think we'd better get ferns. I want to show you a place down here in the hollow where I found some maidenhair the other day. Don't you think that's the prettiest of the ferns? Did you ever find it in any part of the South where you were stationed? I should fancy it might be in the Everglades—or some other damp place."

"I don't know what it is," said Easton, absently.

"Not know maidenhair? Then I've the chance to show you something novel, as well as very pretty. Come!" She sprang lightly from the wall and swept through the bowing brakes and down the slope of the hollow to a spot where clustering maples, flinging their shadows one upon another, made a cool gloom beneath their boughs, and the delicate maidenhair balanced its crest upon its slender purple stems and trembled in the silent air. "Here, here!" called Mrs. Farrell. "Did you ever see anything lovelier? But doesn't it seem a pity to pull it? Well, it must die for women, as humming-birds and pheasants do; we can't look pretty without them, poor things! I'm going to sit down here, Mr. Easton, and you're going to gather

maidenhair for me and show your taste; you haven't experience in it, but you are to have instinct."

She sat down on the broad flat top of a rock, and though her seat was in a spot where the slighter texture of the shade let the sunlight flicker through upon her, she gave a slight tremor and shrugged her shoulders. "You must let me have my shawl, Mr. Easton—my poor health, you know; there's rheumatism and typhoid fever in every breath of this delicious air."

He went to lay the shawl upon her shoulders reverently, but she dragged it down and adjusted it about her waist in a very much prettier effect. "There, now, give me your hat. One of the penalties that a gentleman pays for the pleasure of going braking with a lady is to have his hat trimmed with ferns and to be made to look silly. You may have your revenge in trimming my hat." She began to undo the elastic from her hair; but there were hairpins upon which it was entangled, and she dropped her arms from the attempt, and with a quick, "Ah!" she tried to unloose her glove. It was fastened by one of those little clasps which are so hard to undo, and after many attempts she was obliged to look up at Easton in despair.

"May I try to help you?" he dared to ask.

"Why, if you will be so very kind," she answered, and she held out her beautiful wrist, from which her hand drooped like a flower from its stem. It was a task of some moments, and the young man wrought at it in silence; when it was done, she did

not instantly withdraw her hand, but "Oh, is it really finished?" she asked, and then took it from him and pulled off the glove. She put it up to her hair again, and began to feel about with those women fingers that seem to have all the five senses in their tips; but now they were wise in vain. "I'm afraid, Mr. Easton," she appealed with a well-embarrassed little laugh, "that I must tax your kindness once more. Would you be so *very* good as to look what can be the matter?" and she turned the wonder of her neck toward him and bent down her head. "Is it caught, anywhere?"

"It's caught," he answered, gravely, "on a hair-pin."

"Oh dear!" sighed Mrs. Farrell.

"May I?" asked Easton, after a pause.

"Why—yes—please," she answered, faintly.

He knelt down on the rock beside her and with trembling hands touched the warm, fragrant, silken mass, and lightly disengaged the string. When he handed her the hat she thanked him for it very sweetly, and with an air of simple gratitude laid it in her lap, and drew out its long, hanging ribbons through her fingers. She did this looking with a downcast, absent gaze at her hat. When she lifted her eyes again they were full of a gentle sadness. "I hope you won't think I spoke too lightly of the war and of soldiers, just now."

"I can't think you spoke amiss," he answered, fervently.

"I am sure I *meant* nothing amiss," said Mrs. Farrell, humbly. "But everything one does or

says in this world," she continued, "is so liable to misconstruction, that if one values—if one cares for the opinion of others, one feels like doing almost *anything* to prevent it."

Her eyes fell again, and she twisted the ribbons of her hat into long curls. "I'm glad that at least *you* understood me, and I *do* thank you—yes, more than you can know. How still and beautiful it is here! Do you know, I sometimes think that the boundary, the invisible wall between the two worlds, is nowhere so thin as in the deep woods like this?" Mrs. Farrell looked up at Easton with the eyes of a nun. "It seems as if one could draw nearer to better influences here than anywhere else. Not, of course, but what one can be good anywhere if one wants to be, but it isn't everywhere that one does want to be good. Don't laugh at my moralizing, please," she besought him. "There, take your hat. I won't make a victim of you. I know you'd hate to wear ferns."

Easton protested that though he had never worn ferns, he did not believe he should hate to wear them.

"No matter," said Mrs. Farrell, "the mood is past, now; but you'd better pull a few of them, because one mustn't come for ferns without getting them."

She put together in pretty clusters the ferns with which he heaped her lap, holding them up from time to time and viewing them critically to get the effect, and talked as she worked, while he reclined on a sloping rock near by. "Isn't that rather nice?"

she asked, displaying the finest group, and letting the tips of the ferns drip through her fingers as she softly caressed their spray. "I suppose you'll laugh if I tell you what my great passion in life would be, if I could indulge a great passion—millinery! Bonnets, caps, hats, ribbons, feathers!" Nothing so enraptures a man as to hear the woman of his untold love belittle herself; it intoxicates him that this adorable preciousness can hold itself cheap—as Mrs. Farrell possibly knew. "You know," she went on, "I think I have some little artistic talent—not really enough for painting, but quite enough for clothes. I might set up a studio, and everybody would smile on my efforts, but if I set up a shop, nobody would associate with me. You wouldn't, yourself! Don't pretend to be so much better than other people," cried Mrs. Farrell, with nothing of the convent left in her look.

"I don't know about being better," said Easton. "But I've lived too little in the world to be quite of it, I suppose. I'm afraid I am not shocked at the notion of anybody's being a milliner that likes."

"Oh yes, I know. Cheap ideas of equality. But you wouldn't marry a milliner, if she was ever such a genius in her art."

"If I were in love with her, and she were in love with me and would have me, I would marry her. But why do you make marrying the test of a man's respect for a woman?"

"Isn't it?"

Easton pondered awhile. "Well, yes, it does

seem to be," he said, a little sadly. "But it narrows the destiny of half the world."

"Are you woman's rights?" asked Mrs. Farrell, trailing a plume of fern through the air.

"Oh, I'm woman's anything," said Easton; "anything that women really want; but rights are a subject that they don't seem very certain of, themselves."

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Farrell, "that's the trouble with women; from day to day, and from dress to dress, they don't really know what they want. There's Rachel Woodward; she has this decided talent, but she don't seem to want decidedly to use it, as a man would. I'm not even sure that if all the world were propitious I should open a milliner shop. But I *think* I should. If I ever do, Mr. Easton, and you marry one of my 'prentices, I want you to promise that you'll let her buy her bonnets of me. That isn't asking a great deal, is it?" She was scrutinizing a crest of maidenhair and making it tilt on its stem, as if in doubt just where to put it in the cluster, and she began softly and as if unconsciously, to whistle in a low, delicious note. Then she suddenly stopped, made a little prim mouth, threw up her eyebrows, and said: "Why, excuse me, excuse me! What awful behavior in company!"

Easton gave himself to the joy of being played upon by her charming insolence, with a glad laugh, full of a sort of happy wonder; but she seemed not to notice, while she went on gravely adding spray to spray.

"What are you making all those for?" he asked, when he was willing to change the delight of her silence for the delight of her speech.

"I don't know—for Mrs. Gilbert, I think. She's so much of an invalid that she can't come after things that she doesn't want, as the rest of us can, and so we're always carrying them to her. I often wonder how she gets rid of them. You never see them next day. Isn't it strange?" asked Mrs. Farrell, with a serious face; and abruptly, "What makes you come to the country if you don't know anything about it?"

"Well, I take an ignorant pleasure in it. On this occasion I came because I thought Gilbert would like it."

"Ah, Damon and Pythias! Do New York gentlemen commonly desert their business at the beck of their men friends in that way? We have six Boston husbands belonging to the wives of Woodward farm, and *they* can't leave their business one workday in the week."

"But I'm not a business man. I'm no more useless here than in New York."

Mrs. Farrell looked interested, and Easton went on. "I went into the army too young to have a profession, and came out of it too old—or something—to study one. So I live upon a little money left me by a better man."

"And you don't actually do anything?"

"I can't quite say that. I try not to keep other people from working; that's something; and I have my little pursuits."

"But you have no business occupation?"

"No."

"Really! And your friend, Pythias—is *he* a gentleman of elegant leisure, too?"

"He's a lawyer, if you mean Gilbert."

"Yes, I mean Gilbert," said Mrs. Farrell, abstractedly. "He didn't go in too young, then?"

"He's a little older than I."

"'I said an older soldier, not a better,'" quoted Mrs. Farrell. "Is he—why, excuse me! I seem to be actually *pumping* you."

"I hope you'll believe that I'm not in the habit of exploiting myself and my affairs," said Easton.

But Mrs. Farrell did not seem to heed what he said. She looked him steadily in the face with her bewildering eyes, and asked, "Why doesn't *he* live on some better man's money, too?" and laughed to see his shame painted in his face.

"I have been so silly as to talk of my own business, and you've punished me as I deserved; but I don't think I'll enter into my friend's concerns, even for the honor of making you laugh," he answered, hotly.

"Then you don't like being laughed at?" she gravely questioned. Easton rose to his feet. "What! Are you actually going away from me? I beg you to forgive me—I do indeed! I really meant nothing. You haven't said a word that I don't respect you for. I thought you wouldn't mind it. Tell me how I shall treat you. It's only for a week; I should be so sorry to be enemies with

you while you stay. What shall I do to make peace? What shall I say?"

She rose quickly, and stretched her hand appealingly toward him. A mastering impulse of tenderness filled his heart at her words of regret. Before he knew, he had pressed her hand in a quick kiss against his lips, and then stood holding it fast, awestruck at what he had done.

"Oh! What are you doing?" cried Mrs. Farrell, starting away from him in a panic. "Don't; you mustn't! Mr. Easton! Oh dear, there 'll be somebody coming in a moment!" She wrung her hand loose and, casting one look of fear, wonder, and reproach upon him, turned and walked sadly away. He followed her as silently, and without a word they mounted the slope of the hollow, and passed through the brakes and over the walls, which she mounted now without his help. When they came to the last, which divided the wood from the open meadow, she turned her aggrieved face upon him again and said, meekly: "I shall have to beg you to go back and get me those ferns we left there in the hollow. It won't do to go home without anything. I'll wait here;" and she sat down upon the low broken wall, and averted her face from him again. He went back as he was bidden, and with a little search found the place, the sight of which somehow sent a shiver through him as if it were haunted, and, gathering up the clusters of ferns, returned with them to her. He tried to say something, but could not. She took some of them, and began to talk in a curiously animated way, looking at them and com-

paring them; and then, not far off, he saw Gilbert and the young girls approaching. Mrs. Farrell sprang down from the wall and hurried to meet them. They were covered with brakes and ferns and a gay laughing and talking broke forth among the women. Mrs. Farrell attached Gilbert to her for the walk home; and it fell to Easton to accompany the two young girls. When he left them they said he was very nice-looking, and he was very hard to get along with, much harder than Mr. Gilbert, who always kept saying something to make you laugh. They did not know whether Mr. Easton was really stupid or not; he did not look stupid, and it was quite delightful to have a man so bashful.

In the meantime he had parted in a blank, opaque sort of way from Mrs. Farrell, with whom he left Gilbert, and was walking moodily homeward over that road where he had met her in the morning. He found the hotel intolerable, and after a cup of its Japan tea, and a glance at its hot biscuit, its cold slices of corned beef, its little blocks and wedges of cheese, its small satellite dishes of prunes and preserves, and its twenty-five Sunday evening toilettes, he went out again, and walked far and long in a direction that he knew nothing of except that it was away from where he had spent the day. His heart was still thickly beating in his ears when he got back and found Gilbert alone on the piazza.

"Hello!" said Gilbert. "Developing into a pedestrian? Why did you go away so soon? I think the lovely Farrell missed you. She was quite pensive and *distraite* at first; though I must own

she cheered up and collected herself after a while. She looked extremely attractive in her melancholy."

Easton sat down in the next chair without answering, and, drawing a match along the bottom of the seat, lighted his cigar. After a few whiffs he took it from his lips and held it till it went out.

Gilbert went on with a quick laugh, "She's a most amusing creature!"

"I don't understand what you mean by that," said Easton, turning his face halfway toward his friend, in a fashion he had.

"Well, it's hard to say. I suppose because she's so deep and so transparent. She does everything for an effect, and she isn't at peace with herself for a moment."

"I suppose we all do that," commented Easton.

"Yes, but not with her motive."

"What is her motive?"

"That's not so easy to explain. It's a pity you haven't the data for comprehending her, Easton, and enjoying her character; you don't know other women, and you can't see how sublimely perfect Mrs. Farrell is in her way. She's one of the most beautiful women I ever saw; one of the brightest, the most amiable. But I should be sorry to marry her; I shouldn't want my wife so amiable—to everybody. She isn't meant for the domesticities. There's no harm in her; she simply wants excitement, luxury, applause, all in one, all the time. By Jove! the man that gets her will wish she was *his* widow, and so will she, as soon as she has him. She's an inspired flirt; and I don't mean that she's

like young girls who can't help their innocent coquetries with a man or two; but her flirtatiousness is vast enough for the whole world, and enduring enough for all time. As long as she lives she'll be wanting to try her power upon some one; and there can't be any game so high or so low that she won't fly at it. What a life that would be for her husband!"

Easton sat still while Gilbert spoke, and he remained silent when he ceased. But the words had given him a supreme satisfaction; they had lifted a load from his heart; they had made the way clear and straight. He was infinitely far from resenting what left her, as concerned Gilbert at least, so solely to his love and worship. With his passion their reason or unreason had not a feather's weight.

"Shall you stay any longer than the end of the fortnight?" he asked at last.

"No," said Gilbert, who was used to Easton's way of suddenly turning from the matter of their talk, and coming as suddenly back to it some other time; "I don't think I could stand it longer."

Easton made a motion to replace his cigar in his lips, then looked at it with sudden disgust and flung it over the rail. His mind ran off in wild reverie upon the kiss, which he now feigned again and again upon her hand. His eccentric life and his peculiar temperament had kept him so unlike other young men that he had no trouble for the violated conventionality; it could only be a question of right or wrong with him; he believed that he had

taken an unfair advantage of her attempt at reparation, but the fire that burned in his heart seemed to purge it of whatever wrong there was in his violence. He was reclining there near her on the rock under the hovering shade, with the bracken in light undulation all around above their heads, and the summer at its sweetest in the air and earth; then he despaired to think that the night must pass before he could see her again, that life itself might pass and no such moment come again. His reverie broke in a long, deep sigh.

Gilbert gave a sudden laugh. "Why, I believe, Easton, you are *hit!* You had forgotten I was here," he continued, as Easton looked round in a stupefied way. "Well, I'll leave you to your raptures."

"I'm going to bed, too," said Easton. "I'm tired to death;" and he rose from his chair with a leaden sense of fatigue in every fiber.

Their rooms opened into each other, and Easton was abed when Gilbert rapped on the dividing door. "Come in," he called.

Gilbert came into the room, which the bright moon would have made uncomfortable for any but a lover. "Look here, old fellow," he said, bending over his friend, with one arm stretched along the headboard, "you didn't think to-day, from anything my sister-in-law said, that I'd been making light of you, did you?"

"What did she say?"

"Oh, about Rogers, you know."

"Certainly not."

"Then it isn't necessary to say I hadn't?"

"Oh no," said Easton, turning his head impatiently. "I never thought of it again." Gilbert's anxious loyalty annoyed him, for since they had bidden each other good night the consciousness that he had, however against his will, suffered something to be extorted from him that might be construed as derogation of his friend had troubled him, but he had rather arrogantly dismissed the thought as unworthy of their friendship. Besides, without placing himself in a false light he could not speak of it, and it was vexatious to be reminded of it by Gilbert's scruples.

"Then it's all right?" asked Gilbert.

"Why, certainly!" said Easton, impatiently.

Gilbert slowly withdrew his arm from where it lay, and stood a moment in hesitation; then he said, "Good night," and went into his own room.

Easton felt the vague disappointment in his manner, but was helpless to make the reparation to which his heart urged him. He could not expose Mrs. Farrell's part in what had been said to his friend's interpretation; the wrong done was one of those things which must be lived down.

Chapter VI

IT was much later than his wonted hour when Easton woke next morning, and found a scrap of paper stuck between the mirror and its frame, on which Gilbert had written: "Off for the trout brooks. See you at dinner." This gave him a moment's pause, and then he went on dressing. He had a lover's single purpose of seeing her he loved, and a lover's insensibility to questions of ways and means; and after breakfast he walked away toward the farm, thinking what he should say and do when he met Mrs. Farrell.

At Woodward farm there was no organization for the reception of callers upon the guests. There was no bell, and there would have been no one to answer it if there was a bell. But in a house where there was so much leisure and so much curiosity, this was ordinarily a small deprivation. Some of the ladies were always looking out, and if they saw any of their friends coming they ran forth to meet them with a great deal of pleasant twitter, having shouted a voluble welcome to them from the time they came in sight. If it was some one whom the lookers-out recognized as the friend of another lady, they went to alarm her in ample season, and by the time the visitor ascended the piazza steps the lady was at

the door. Besides, some one or other was always sitting about outdoors, and if unknown visitors approached, it was a grateful little excitement to ask them, when they had vainly inspected the door frame for a bell, if one could call her whom they wished to see.

But when Mr. Easton was descried approaching, people were quite undecided what to do, and he was on the piazza before he had himself perceived that he had something to do besides walking up to Mrs. Farrell and telling her that he loved her. It appeared to him impossible that she should not be there to receive him; he had been so rapt in his meditation upon her that he had not believed but he must meet her as soon as he reached the door; and now she was not there! Several heads were decently taken in from the upper windows, and the broad piazza was empty but for the two young ladies whom he had walked home with yesterday; they sat half in the sunlight at the corner, and one was looking down upon the work in her hand, and the other looking down upon the book she was reading aloud, and he fancied himself unperceived by them. A mighty disappointment fell upon him; he had stormed the fortress, to find it empty and equipped with Quaker guns. As he stood there helpless, the young girl who was reading discreetly chanced to look round, and to her evident great surprise discovered him. She gave him a friendly little nod, and as he came toward her she rose with a pretty air and offered her hand, and the other did the same. They talked excitedly for a minute or

two, and then the conversation began to flag, and Easton uneasily shifted his attitude. No doubt they would have liked to keep him with them for a little while, but perhaps they did not know how, or thought they ought to give him a chance to get away if he wanted; or perhaps she who spoke was quite sincere in asking, with a bright smile, "Did you want to see Mrs."— his heart began to beat in his ears—"Gilbert?"

"Yes," said Easton, stupidly.

"I will go and tell her," said the young girl, laying her book down open, and lightly turning away.

"Thanks—I'm very sorry to trouble you," said Easton; and neither he nor she with whom he was left contrived to speak one word more while the other was gone. When she came back she said, with some trepidation: "Mrs. Gilbert is very, very sorry. She has one of her bad headaches, and she can't see any one. She's so sorry to miss your call."

"Oh, no matter—no matter," answered Easton. "I'm sorry she's not well; please give her my—please say I was sorry. Good morning!" he added, abruptly, and cast a wistful, despairing look at the front of the house, and could not go. "Is—is Mrs. Farrell at home?" he asked, desperately.

The young girl cruelly smiled, and her companion cruelly cast down her eyes, and then they both blushed.

"No," said the first, "she isn't at home. She said she was going with Miss Rachel to help pick peas."

"Oh!" was all that Easton could say; and as he turned away the girls said it was a perfect shame, and they were rude girls, too flat for anything.

Easton forgot them both, and walked back toward his hotel. On the way down the slope from the house he looked in the direction of the vegetable garden, and faltered. Mrs. Farrell's voice floated over to him in a gay laugh from the ranks of the pea vines, and an insane longing to behold her filled him to the throat. But he could not go and tell her he loved her, there among the pea pods; even he felt that. He twisted his mustache into the corner of his mouth, beat the ground with his stick, and hurried away, hurt, tormented, but not at all daunted or moved from his mind to have speech with her as soon as ever he could.

When she had finished her part of the work, which was to gather peas with fitful intensity and then to talk for long intervals to Rachel's taciturn perseverance, she emptied her small harvest into the basket that one of the Woodward boys carried, and walked picturesquely back to the house under her broad hat, which dropped its shade just across her lips like a grace veil, and left her dark eyes to glow, starlike, from its depths. In this becoming effect she sat down on the kitchen threshold, with the wide doors open round her, and took some of the peas into her lap and shelled them with a lazy ease, moving her arms from the elbows resting on her knees, and managing chiefly with her flexile wrists, and went on talking with Rachel of a picnic excursion to the mountain which she wished to

plan. "We shall not want any one along but the youngest Miss Jewett and Jenny Alden and Ben, and we can have a splendid time. It's just the right season, now. Come, Mrs. Woodward," she called into the kitchen, "are you going to let me go?"

"You mostly do what you like, Mrs. Farrell," answered Mrs. Woodward's voice, "and the only way I get any obedience out of you is to forbid you to do what you don't like. Yes, go. All I ask is that you don't take me."

"Now, then, Miss Prim," said Mrs. Farrell to Rachel, "you see you're commanded to go. What had we better wear?"

"Oh, wear all your worst things," said Mrs. Woodward.

"Yes, but I'm one of those poor people who can't afford to have any but best things. I'm going to get you to lend me some of your worst, Mrs. Woodward, and I'm going to borrow Ben's hat. Will you lend it to me, Ben?" she tenderly asked of the grave young felllw who stood near, and who had to shift himself from one foot to the other and turn his face away before he could assent. She laughed at his trepidation, as if she knew the reason of it. But by the time he could confront Mrs. Farrell again, she apparently did not care for his answer. Her eyes were fixed upon the figure of Gilbert as he came up the road toward the house. He came in sight suddenly, as if he had climbed the wall from one of the birch-bordered meadows. He was better worth looking at than Ben Woodward, being very

brave in his high boots and his straw hat, with his bundled rod and his trout basket, a strong, sinewy shape, and a face very handsome in its fashion. As he drew nearer, he turned aside and slanted his course toward the door where Mrs. Farrell sat. Before he came up to her place Rachel had silently vanished within, and Mrs. Farrell sat there alone.

"Good morning," he called out, taking off his hat.

"Good morning," returned Mrs. Farrell, without changing her posture. "Don't you want to stop and help shell peas?"

Either their acquaintance had prospered rapidly after Easton had left them together the afternoon before, or else this was Mrs. Farrell's indifference to social preliminaries.

"No, thanks," said Gilbert, tranquilly, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. "My domestic gifts are small. But I was thinking, as I came along, that I would give you people my trout."

"Really? How very handsome of you!"

"Yes, there's nothing mean about me. They sometimes object to cooking them at the hotel, and I don't quite like to throw them away."

"Why, this is true charity! If I'm to accept them in the name of the farm, I must see them first."

Gilbert took off his basket and laid it at her feet; she opened it and cried out, "What beauties! Like flowers! But"—she gave ever so little a pretty grimace—"not exactly the same perfume!"

"No," said he, "they can't very well help that. But they improve with frying."

"That's true," said Mrs. Farrell. "Well, we'll take them. And you must get Mrs. Gilbert to ask you to supper. *I* can't do it."

"No," answered Gilbert, "my generosity shall be unblemished. I never eat the trout I've taken, any more. Easton's religion has had that much effect upon me."

"Easton's religion?"

"Yes; he thinks it's atrocious to kill anything for the pleasure of it."

"How very droll! And you're able to behave so nobly with your fish because you couldn't get them cooked, and wouldn't eat them if you could!" Gilbert had been standing beside the pile of maple firewood which flanked the kitchen door and sent up a pleasant odor in the sun; Mrs. Farrell said, "Sit down," and he sat down on a broad block used for splitting kindling. "I wonder what Mr. Easton would have had to say to some of the apostles on the subject of fishing."

"That's what I asked him once; but he says they didn't fish for fun."

"He distinguishes! Well, but what about the clergymen who make it their diversion, and then boast about their prowess in books?"

"Ask Easton for his opinion. I can assure you it's worth hearing—if you like contempt red hot."

"I don't believe I do! I'd rather ask you. Is that his whole creed, anti-trouting?"

"No; hardly. He has a kindness for most of the human race as well as the lower animals. The only creature he really hates is the horse," said Gilbert,

with a laugh as of recollected mirth; and in fact Easton had been known in his army days for his antipathy to his chargers. He always got full service out of them by sheer force of will; but he never liked them, and never professed to understand them; the horse, he contended, was unfitted for a gentleman's society by the blackguard company he habitually kept. "But I don't think he'd do even a horse a wanton injury," concluded Gilbert.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Farrell. "And the rest of his opinions?"

"Why, there are very few things that Easton hadn't an opinion upon. It's rather odd, don't you think, to find a man in our age and country really caring enough for matters in general to make up his mind about them?"

"Very," said Mrs. Farrell, twisting her slim shape round to take a handful of peas out of the basket behind her and putting them into her lap. "Go on."

"That was all I had to say," returned Gilbert, with a mocking light in his eyes.

"Oh, how can you be so cruel?—when I had just got ready to listen! Do go on!"

"Why, I was thinking—" began Gilbert.

"Yes, yes!" eagerly prompted Mrs. Farrell, "thinking (really thinking! Of course you can't have been doing it long!)—thinking—"

"That it was a very inconvenient practice to inquire into the right and wrong of many things," proceeded Gilbert, in solid indifference to her light impertinences; whereupon she seemed to suffer

some evanescent confusion. "It gives you no sort of moral leeway. Suppose you want to do something—anything—out of the ordinary line of things that you do or don't do; well, if you haven't considered too impertinently of right and wrong in general, you do it without once thinking whether you ought or oughtn't, and there you are on the safe side, anyway."

"Oh, what a beautiful philosophy!" moaned Mrs. Farrell, clasping her hands together without moving her elbows from their careless pose. She rested her cheek a moment on her folded hands; then she asked with a voice full of mock emotion, "Do you think it would do for Woman, Mr. Gilbert? It seems just made for her!"

"I hadn't thought about Woman," said Gilbert; "that's a matter still to be considered. You must give me time."

"Oh yes, we will be patient—patient!" and Mrs. Farrell began to shell the peas with an air of tragical endurance. "Take any length of time you wish. But in the meanwhile, can't you state the Eastonian principle more fully?"

"Only by saying that it's the opposite of the system you admire and covet. Easton isn't a man to formulate his ideas very freely. You're astounded every now and then by some extraordinary piece of apparently quite uncalled-for uprightness, and then you find that he had long contemplated some such exigency, and had his conscience in perfect training."

"How very droll!" said Mrs. Farrell. Then she

said, looking at him through her eyelashes, "It's quite touching to see such attached friends."

Gilbert stirred uneasily on his block, and answered, "It's a great honor to form part of a spectacle affecting to you, Mrs. Farrell—if you mean Easton and me."

"Yes, I do. Don't scoff at my weak impressibility. You must see that it's a thing calculated to rouse a woman's curiosity. You seem so very different!"

"Men and women are very different, in some respects," calmly responded Gilbert, "but there have been quite strong attachments between them."

"True," rejoined Mrs. Farrell with burlesque thoughtfulness. "But in this case they're both men."

"Nothing escapes you, Mrs. Farrell," said Gilbert, bowing his head.

"You praise me more than I deserve. I didn't take all your meaning. One of you is so mightily, so heroically manly, that the other necessarily womanizes in comparison. Isn't that it? But which is which?"

"Modesty forbids me to claim either transcendent distinction."

"Oh, I know! Mr. Easton is your ideal man. But I should want *my* ideal man to *do* something in the world, to devote himself to some one great object. That's what I should do, if I were a man."

"Of course. How do you know Easton doesn't?"

'I merely have his word for it."

Gilbert looked surprised and perplexed. At

length he said, rather dryly: "I congratulate you on getting Easton to talk about himself. Not many people have succeeded."

"Oh, is he so reticent?" asked Mrs. Farrell. "I didn't find him so. He was quite free in mentioning his little pursuits, as he called it."

"His book!" cried Gilbert. "Did he talk to you about *that*, already?"

"Why, it seems that you don't know your friend very well, after all!" mocked Mrs. Farrell with a laugh of triumph. "Why shouldn't he talk to me about his book? He knew I would be interested in the subject; any woman would."

"Upon my word, I don't see what should particularly interest you in a history of heroism."

Mrs. Farrell celebrated her fresh advantage with another laugh. "Why not?" she asked, taking some of the peas up in her hand and letting them drop through her fingers. "We're all heroes till we've been tried, and I haven't been tried. He's going to put me into it. Do tell me his plan in writing it," she entreated.

"Look here, Mrs. Farrell," said Gilbert, bending forward and looking keenly at her, "do you mean to tell me that Easton has actually been talking to you about his book, which I now perceive I mentioned first?"

"Look here, Mr. Gilbert," said she, with an audaciously charming caricature of his attitude and manner, "do you mean to tell me that you doubt my word?"

"Well," said Gilbert, with a laugh, "I own my-

self beaten. Did you ever hear of Miss Lillian—I forget her name—the St. Louis lawyeress? Why don't you study our profession? At a cross-examination no witness could resist you, if I may judge from my own experience in helplessly blabbing what you never would have known otherwise. Come, Mrs. Farrell, you have triumphed so magnificently that you can afford to be frank; own, now, that all you know of Easton's book is what I've told."

He rose and stood looking down admiringly upon her uplifted face.

"No," she answered, "I shall not do *that*, Colonel —I beg your pardon; I mean *Major*—Gilbert. Mr. Easton's the colonel," she added, parenthetically. "What *was* the reason," she continued with well-studied innocence, "that he came out a colonel and you came out only a major, when you had so much the advantage of him at first?"

Gilbert's face had hardened in the lines of a smile, and it kept the shape of a smile while all mirth died out of it, and he stared into the eyes of Mrs. Farrell, from which a sudden panic looked.

"Oh, dear me!" she said, naturally. "Don't—don't mind. I didn't mean to do anything. What have I done? Oh, I wish—don't answer, please!" she implored.

But Gilbert gravely responded, "Because he was a better soldier. I am sorry if I alarm you by the statement of the fact. Did you experience any fright when Mr. Easton told you?"

"Oh, he never told me that he was braver than

you. I don't think he meant to talk of the matter at all."

"I can believe that," replied Gilbert; "neither do I."

Mrs. Farrell made no comment, but, taking a fresh handful of the peas, shelled them, with such downcast eyes that it was impossible to say whether she was looking at Gilbert through her lashes or not. Nor could one tell with just what feeling the corners of her mouth trembled, but his sternness seemed to have frightened and silenced her. Gilbert breathed quickly as he regarded her, but after waiting awhile, irresolute, he gave a short, sardonic laugh and rose. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," returned Mrs. Farrell, woundedly, and meekly added, "Thank you for the fish," to which he bowed his reply and then walked round the house.

He knocked at Mrs. Gilbert's door, and received from her own lips the same answer which had already turned Easton away, and so went quickly down the road in the direction of the hotel. In the meantime Easton had not been able to turn his steps far from the farm; whichever way he went they tended indirectly thither, and at last he started boldly back. At the moment he mounted the front piazza steps Mrs. Farrell, having finished or relinquished her domestic task, came round the gallery from the side of the house and met him.

"Good morning, Mr. Easton," she said, pensively. "Did you want to see Mrs. Gilbert? I believe she has a very bad headache to-day."

"No, I didn't want to see Mrs. Gilbert. I came to see you."

"Oh! Then will you sit down here?" she asked, and took her place where the two young girls, who were now away in the fields, had been sitting.

"I came here some time ago," said Easton, "and, not finding you, I tried to find that place where we got the ferns yesterday."

Mrs. Farrell's broad hat-brim thrust uncomfortably against the house where she sat on the settle beside the wall, and she took her hat off; a mass of her dark hair tumbled in a rich disorder on her back. She laid her hat in her lap and waited.

"I went there," pursued Easton, "because I had a stupid hope that the place might inspire me with some faint shadow of reason, of excuse, for—"

"Yes," said Mrs. Farrell, interpreting his hesitation with candid reproachfulness; "it was not fair, and, considering all things, Mr. Easton, I don't think it was quite kind."

"Kind? Kind!" cried Easton, with an inexpressible pang. Then after a moment's thought he added: "No, it was not kind; it was base, tyrannical, brutal! It was worthy of a savage!"

Mrs. Farrell turned her face slightly away, and if she had been acting wounded innocence she could hardly have known it.

"There was no excuse for such a thing but the one thing in the world which it is least like. That is its excuse to me; it seems an insolent affront to suppose that it can atone for it to you."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Farrell, demurely, "that

women's actions are often misconstrued. Indeed, I ought to know it from bitter experience in my own case. I ought to remember that men seem even *eager* to misinterpret any confidence put in them; but yesterday—I—I couldn't!"

There was a sort of passionate reproach, a tacit confession that she had singularly trusted him to her hurt, in the close of this speech, which went to Easton's heart. "No, there is nothing for me to say in extenuation. Even if I tell you—"

"'Sh!" cried Mrs. Farrell, putting her hand down at her side and electrically touching that wrist of his next to her; "I thought somebody was coming. Yes, I know. Even if you tell me that you meant no harm—and I don't believe you did—still, don't you know— Oh!" she broke off, "why is it that there isn't some common ground for men and women to meet on, and be helpful to each other? Must they always be either lovers or enemies? Yes, enemies; it's really a state of almost warfare; there can't be any kindness, any freedom, any sincerity. And yet there are times in every woman's life when she does long so for the intelligence as well as the sympathy of some good man; and she can't have it unless she's married or engaged. She often wants to see how some action of her own looks through a man's eyes, and the wisest woman can't tell her! Every new disappointment that she meets with is harder to bear. I didn't mind your kissing my hand; that's nothing; it might even be something that a woman would be proud of; but by the way you did it you shocked and frightened

me; I saw that you had misunderstood me, and I —I was afraid you didn't—respect me."

Mrs. Farrell's grieving mood was so admirably represented in the outline of her cheek, the downward curve of the corner of her mouth, the low sweep of her long eyelash, and at the same time it was so discreetly *felt*, so far from overcharged or exaggerated, that even an indifferent spectator must have been affected with reverent sympathy. Easton's heart was wrung with unspeakable tenderness and regret and shame. He could not break the silence that followed her words for some moments. At last he said, "I see how it must have appeared to you; but it was not so. I have as little hope as I deserve to have when I say—"

"There! Don't speak of it any more," Mrs. Farrell interrupted, with signs of returning cheerfulness, but with beams not too speedily tricked. "Let's not think of it. I know there must have been something to blame in me. I have a way," she continued regretfully, "which I'm sure no one feels the disadvantage of more than I do—a sort of perverse impulse; I don't know what else to call it—that leads me to try people's patience, and see how far I can go with them; and I'm afraid I must have abused your good-nature yesterday in speaking as I did of your friend."

"You said nothing against him that I remember."

"I ought to be very grateful, then. I thought I was wrong in asking you about your military rank and his, when I saw that you were avoiding the subject. I couldn't help it, and yet I meant no harm."

"I know you meant none. I won't deny that I was trying to avoid the subject. It was placing me in the ugly light of seeming to boast at the expense of my friend."

"Yes, yes; I knew that; and I suppose it was just that which made me keep on; I liked to see your modesty put to the blush. It was wrong; but you don't think I had any very bad motive in it?"

"No, none!" said Easton, quickly.

"I am so glad. I know Mr. Gilbert isn't so generous!" Easton looked at her inquiringly, and "Oh, Mr. Easton," she broke out, "what have I been doing? It must really look very black to you. Mr. Gilbert has just been here, and I have been talking to *him* about it—I don't know *why* I did; and he went away very angry. It seems just as if I had been trying to make a quarrel between you!" She hid her face in her hands, while Easton remained gravely silent. "Why don't you speak to me?" she implored him, without taking away her hands. "It will kill me if you don't. Say something, anything; blame me, scold me! You know you think I've behaved very wickedly. You do!"

"No, I don't think so," replied Easton, seriously. He looked at her hopeless face, from which she had now withdrawn her hands, and he seemed to be losing his fast hold upon things, upon truth and right and wrong. Two days ago he had not seen this face or known that it was in the world; now it was so heavenly dear to him that it seemed to describe all knowledge and being. It was not a ques-

tion whether she had a right to violate the secrecy to which Gilbert's silence and his own had consigned the fact she had so recklessly played with; rightly or wrongly she had done this, and he had now to ask himself whether he could forgive her error to her penitence. Yet he did not ask himself that; she had done it; and he loved her; and there was an end. How could he believe ill of her? What oblique motive could he attribute to her that his heart's tenderness would suffer?

"Ah," she broke out again, "you can never forgive me—and I can never forgive myself. Why did you come here to make me so unhappy!"

"Don't—don't say that!" the young man implored. "There is no harm done. I was to blame for ever talking with you about the matter. How could I expect you to treat it with seriousness or secrecy? You couldn't know that it had ever been a sore affair with us. Don't be troubled. Gilbert's friendship isn't built upon such a slight basis that it can't bear—" A stifling recollection of the delicacy, passing the love of women, with which they had always treated each other smote upon him: what could Gilbert think of *his* delicacy now? "I can make it all right with him," he continued, as soon as he could get breath.

"With *him?*" murmured Mrs. Farrell. "Then *you* forgive me?"

"I had nothing to forgive," said Easton, with all his love in his face; so that she looked away and blushed. "Don't think of it any more; it's nothing."

"How generous you are! Oh, women couldn't be like that! How shall I thank you? I'll never forgive myself in the world—that's how," she said, a faint smile dawning on her contrite face.

"That would be a poor way. I want you to be friends with those I—like."

"Do you mean Mr. Gilbert?"

"No, I don't mean Gilbert."

Mrs. Farrell cast down her eyes. Then she bravely lifted them. "I will do whatever you say," she breathed, and a radiant light came from her face as she rose and stood fronting him. "After what I've done you have a right to *command* me. But now you must let me go. I have some things to do. You've made me *so* happy."

"And you me!" he said, and he took her hand, which he dropped after a moment, and walked away, giddy with his insensate joy. All his soul was flattered by the far-hinting sweetness with which she had used him, and he was contented in every pulse. When he despaired he had felt that he must tell her he loved her, and let any effect follow that would, but now he was patient with the hope which he hoped she had given him; for his confidence did not go beyond this. He loved too much to believe himself loved or to perceive that he was encouraged. To the supreme modesty of his passion her kindness was but leave to live; and he was abjectly grateful for it. He lifted his thoughts to her with worshiping reverence; it was heaven to dwell in the beauty of her looks, her attitudes, her movements; the sense of her self-

reproachful meekness possessed him with the tenderest rapture. How could he expose this to the harsh misconception of his friend? How could he explain her blamelessness as he felt it? He knew the sort of sarcastic quiet that Gilbert would keep when he should set about making him understand that he, Easton, was alone guilty in any wrong done him; that he, Easton, had given her the clue which she had afterward followed up, from an ignorant caprice, in her talk with Gilbert; that she had bitterly upbraided herself for her error, and had dreaded its effects with a terror that he had hardly known how to appease. When he thought of Gilbert's incredulity, his heart beat fiercely; and he felt that he could not suffer it. Yet the thing could not go without some effort on his part to assure his friend that he had not been disloyal, and how to give him this assurance he did not see. No, he could not speak of it; and yet he must. A veritable groan burst from his lips as he mounted a little hillock in the road and took off his hat to wipe away the drops of sweat from his forehead. Whither had all his bliss vanished? A thrush sat in the elm tree over him and sang long and sweet, and his heart ached in time with the pulses of that happy music. A little way off, under the shadow of this tree, Gilbert lay upon the grass, with his face up to the sky; and it was to Easton, when directly he caught sight of him, as if he had laid him there dead. He fearfully made a little noise, and Gilbert opened his eyes, and, looking at him, sat up. "I was waiting for you," he said, gravely and not un-

kindly. "I supposed you had gone over to the farm, for I did not find you at the hotel. Easton," he continued, "I saw Mrs. Farrell a little while ago. Perhaps you've just come from seeing her?"

"Yes," answered Easton.

"Perhaps you don't know what we talked of?"

"Yes, I do."

"I suppose it was her use of what you told her that annoyed me; but I can't understand how you came to mention the matter to her at all; much less to go into particulars, as you seem to have done."

Easton colored, but did not speak.

"Have you anything to say to me, Easton? I can't bear to have the slightest thing between us."

"Not—not now."

They were both silent; and Easton doggedly cast down his eyes.

"Very well, Easton," said Gilbert, rising and going toward him, "if you intend to say something by and by, and can justify yourself to yourself in making me wait, it's all right; I can wait."

He held out his hand, and Easton yearned to grasp it as it was offered, but his cold clasp relaxed upon it, and the severed friends trudged silently on through the dust toward the hotel.

Chapter VII

THAT evening Gilbert found his sister-in-law well of her headache, and disposed to celebrate the charm of a headache that always went off with the going down of the sun. He responded at random, and then she began to talk to him of Easton, and he listened with a restlessness which she could not help noticing. "You don't seem to care to sing the praises of your idol, this evening," she said.

"One can't always be singing the praises of one's idols," he answered, "if you like to call them so. One wants a little variety. You know how the Neapolitans give themselves up to comfortable cursing in the case of saints who don't indicate the winning lottery numbers."

"I don't exactly see the application, William, but I'm always ready to curse anybody; and we will devote Mr. Easton to a little malediction. Have you had a tiff?"

"I thought you were going to curse, and you commence questioning."

"That's true; my curiosity *is* uppermost. Do tell me about it. I suppose Mrs. Farrell is somehow at the bottom of it. I wouldn't have such a friendship as yours and Easton's on any account. It

has cost too much. I wonder you haven't assassinated each other long ago."

"I'm glad your headache's gone," said Gilbert.

"Yes, that's gone—thanks to the sunset or the headache pill. But I'm getting what no pill has yet been patented for; I mean a heartache, and for you, my poor boy. Oh, you open book! Don't you suppose I can read where that woman has written Finis in her high-shouldered English hand against the chapter of your friendship with Easton?"

"You are taking it seriously, Susan."

"Well, well. See if I'm not right. I thought you told me your friend was afraid of ladies. Mrs. Farrell seems to have persuaded him that they're not so dangerous. He's been here all afternoon. Oh, one can know such a thing as that even with the headache in a darkened room. No, not the whole afternoon; they were gone a long while on a walk. He follows her all about with his eyes when she won't let him follow on foot; he's making a perfect trophy of himself. That's the report."

"Very likely," said Gilbert. "Easton never does things by halves."

"He'd better, then—some things."

"Why, I don't know. Why shouldn't he marry her if he wants?"

"I don't believe *she* wants. He can't take her fancy long, though very likely now she thinks he can. That was very pretty of you to give her your trout, this morning," said Mrs. Gilbert, with a sharp look at her brother-in-law. "She had them

for supper, and ate a great many—for your sake, I suppose. It's you that she wants, William!"

"Does she?" asked Gilbert, with a bitterish accent. "She has an odd way of going about to get me."

"What has she done?" demanded Mrs. Gilbert, making an instant rush for the breach. Gilbert covered it with a quizzical smile. "Oh!" she continued, plainly enjoying her own discomfiture, "when will men learn that the boomerang is the natural weapon of woman? We're all cross-eyed when it comes to love-glances; you can't tell where we're looking. You think she's aiming at Easton! Poor fellow!"

"If I stay here talking," said Gilbert, rising, "I shall bring on your headache again. Good night."

"Oh, William," Mrs. Gilbert appealed, "something sad has happened between you and Easton; and I'm very, very sorry. *I* liked him, too; and I'm grieved to have your old friendship touched. But I know *you* are not to blame—and don't you be! I shall hate him if he breaks with you. Good night, my dear. Don't tell me anything you don't want to."

"I won't," said Gilbert, kissing his hand to her at the door.

She could not help laughing, but when he was gone she turned to the glass with an anxious air, and after a while began to let down the loose, hastily ordered folds of her hair. She stood there a long time, thoughtfully brushing it out, taking hold of it near her head with the left hand, and bending sidewise as she smoothed it down. In the light of

the kerosene lamps which she had set on either side of the mirror, her reflected face looked up from the lucid depths with an invalid's wanness, which the whimsicality of her mouth and eyes made the more pathetic. Suddenly she glanced round at the door with an unchanging face, and said, "Come in," in answer to a light rap; and Rachel Woodward entered with a shy, cold hesitation.

"Oh!— Why, Miss Rachel! Do come in!" repeated Mrs. Gilbert, contriving in the last words to subdue the surprise of her first tones. "You won't mind my brushing my hair? There's so very little of it! Sit down."

She went on to give the last touches, with friendly looks at the girl in the glass, and with various little arts of inattention trying to make it easy for her visitor to disembarrass herself. Then she sat down in her rocking-chair, facing Rachel, who had received her kindliness not unkindly, but now came promptly to her business.

"I oughtn't to disturb you to-night, Mrs. Gilbert," she said, "and I should have come Saturday night, but I knew you had company; and last night was Sabbath. I wanted to thank you for buying that picture of mine. I never thought of anyone's buying it; and I'm afraid you gave more than you ought. I couldn't bear you should do that. I've been talking about it with mother, and she thinks I ought to offer you part of the money back."

Mrs. Gilbert listened without interruption of any sort, and the girl, doubtless knowing better how to

deal with this impassiveness than with that second-growth impulse which in city New-Englanders has sprung up on surfaces shorn so bare by Puritanism. went on tranquilly.

"We think it is like this: it isn't probable, even if this picture is worth all of what you paid, that I can do any more as good, and if you've bought it to encourage me, I might disappoint you in the end. Besides, we should not be willing to be beholden to anybody."

Having said her say, Rachel waited for Mrs. Gilbert's response, who answered, quietly, "I know that you and your mother are perfectly sincere, and I am glad you came to say this to me. How much should you think I ought to take back?"

Rachel thought a moment and said, soberly, "The paper cost twenty-five cents; then I used some of a preparation of Mrs. Farrell's to keep the charcoal from rubbing, but that didn't come to anything. If my picture took the first premium at the county fair—we did think some of sending it there at first—it would be three dollars, but we should have had to pay seventy-five cents for entering it. If you really *want* the picture, Mrs. Gilbert, and are not buying it for any other reason, you can have it for two and a quarter."

"Very well," said Mrs. Gilbert, gravely, "have you brought me the change? Then please hand it to me, as I'm an old lady and very much settled in my rocking-chair." The girl obeyed, and approached her with some bank-notes in her hand. The elder woman leaned forward and caught her

by either wrist, and held her, while she exclaimed, "Rachel, you're the manliest girl, and your mother's the manliest woman, I know of—and I can't say anything better! But don't think you can take advantage of my sex, for all that. You shall not give me back a mill—if there is such a thing outside of the arithmetic. Two dollars and a quarter! Upon my word I don't know whether to laugh or cry at you! I didn't know there was so much uncorruption left in the world. What do you suppose Mrs. Stevenson will be asking by and by for her cat-tails, when she's learned to paint them for door-panels? Why—no, I won't blot your innocence with a knowledge of that swindling. Your Blossom is worth all I paid for her. Don't be afraid that I bought her to encourage you. No, my dear, that isn't my line. I'm the great American *dis*courager. I suppose Mrs. Farrell has been babbling to you about the admiration your picture excited. She's a foolish woman. It *was* admired, and I think you might be a painter. But, oh, dear me! why should anyone encourage you on that account? Talent is a trouble and a vexation even to men, who are strong enough to fight against it; but for women it's nothing but misery. The only hope for you that I can see is that you've got something of a man's honesty and modesty to help you through. Draw up your chair and sit down by me, Rachel. I want to talk to you, I want to catechise you. Oh, you needn't be afraid of me! I'm not going to do you any favor; and you shall keep me at a proper distance in everything you say!"

She smiled quizzically at the girl's constraint, and added, "But I'm older than you, and I've seen more of the world, and maybe I'll be able to tell you some things it would be useful for you to know. You shall pay me what you think is right, if I do. Why don't you want to be beholden to anyone? Why shouldn't I give you more for your picture than it's worth, if I like?"

"I don't know," answered Rachel, shyly puzzled. "It's a kind of feeling. The laborer is worthy of his hire; but he isn't if he takes any more."

"Good! first-rate! And you shouldn't think it pleasant to have things given to you?"

"Oh no!" cried the girl quickly, with a kind of shiver; "we had enough of that when father was preaching, and we used to have to take everything we ate or wore as a sort of gracious gift. We children didn't feel it as my mother did, of course. When we came here—" but at this word she stopped and set her lips firmly.

"Go on," said Mrs. Gilbert. "When you came here your mother said you should starve and go in rags before you took a shred or a morsel from anybody."

"How did you know?" inquired Rachel, lifting her eyes in a calm, grave surprise.

"I knew it because I respect your mother. When I order a great ideal picture of America from you, you shall paint me your mother's portrait. Only in these days they'll say it isn't in the least like America. No matter: it's like what she has been and hasn't forgotten how to be again."

"Yes," said Rachel, simply, "we all tell mother there's not many like her nowadays, and folks won't understand her way with them, and will lay it to pride."

"Oh, let them lay it to what they like!" cried Mrs. Gilbert, with enthusiasm. "If she can keep the black burden of gratitude off your souls, it's no matter. It hardens the heart worse than prosperity."

Rachel looked sober at the expression of these cynical ideas, and edged ever so little away from Mrs. Gilbert, who burst into a laugh. "Don't mind my harum-scarum paradoxes, Rachel! I've had a great many kind things said and done to me, and there are several of my benefactors whom I don't hate at all. But how is it," she asked, being perhaps unable to deny herself the pleasure of looking further into this sincere nature, even if she used an unfair pressure in her questions—"how is it that you have let Mrs. Farrell give you lessons in drawing for nothing?"

Rachel colored and was silent some moments before she answered with dignity, "We can take it off her board, when we find out what it ought to be. I don't know as they could rightly be called lessons. I never copied anything of hers."

"I can very well imagine it," said Mrs. Gilbert, dryly. "Do you admire her pictures?"

Rachel paused again before answering. "No, I can't say I do. But she has told me a great many useful things, and she has corrected what I was doing. I wish you hadn't asked me that, Mrs. Gilbert; I don't think—"

"It was quite generous? No, it wasn't; but I couldn't help it. I've never seen any of Mrs. Farrell's work, and if she's been of use to you, I never want to. Don't be troubled. You haven't been disloyal to your friend. Dear me, you should hear how *I* talk about *my* friends! Don't go yet, my dear," coaxed Mrs. Gilbert, "it 'll be a real charity to stay with me a little while, to-night. I'm fretted. Do you like to draw? Did you enjoy doing Blossom's portrait?"

"I hardly know about enjoying it. I didn't think of my own feelings. But—yes, I was glad when I seemed to be getting it right."

"I don't quite know what to think of you," said Mrs. Gilbert, gravely, and the calm-faced young girl returned her absent look with one that claimed a mutual uncertainty. Mrs. Gilbert resumed suddenly with, "Rachel! has anybody ever been so silly as to talk to you about *genius?*"

Rachel smiled a little, and said evasively that she did not mind such talk.

"That's right!" said Mrs. Gilbert. "Don't get that into your head; it's worse poison than gratitude. I'm always twaddling about it; it's my besetting sin; but I hope I see the folly and wickedness of it. If you are going to be an artist, think of pictures as hard work; don't get to supposing that all your little efforts are inspirations. God has got something else to do. Don't be alarmed at my way of putting things; it doesn't *sound* like religion, but it *is*. If he's given you a decided talent in this way—and it's altogether too soon yet for you to be

certain—it's probably because he finds you able to 'endure hardness,' as Paul says, to work and to be consoled and occupied by working. After all, my dear, it's like every other thing here below; it's only a kind of toy; and you mustn't let it be your whole life; don't be selfishly devoted to it. Sometimes it seems to me that the Lord must smile to see how seriously and rapaciously we take things. I can look back and see how balls and parties were once my toys, and my engagement was only a precious plaything! When I got married, what a toy that was! A new husband—just think of it! What an amusement for a young girl! And my first house, how I played with it, and petted it, and made it pretty, and adored it! When my health gave way, it all changed, but I had my toys still. I have had doctors of every age and sex for dolls. I've played with every school of medicine; just now I've a headache pill that I idolize; not that it keeps me from having the headache. The main thing, as I said, is not to be selfish with your toys. I would share my pills with my worst enemy."

Mrs. Gilbert seemed to enjoy the gravity with which the girl listened, and to be as well satisfied as if she had taken her lightness lightly. Rachel answered what had been said, so far as it related to herself, by saying that she had scarcely thought of painting as a profession, and that she did not see how she could afford to study it. But she presumed that if it were meant she should, a way would be found for her to help herself.

"But have you no ambition to distinguish your-

self?" asked Mrs. Gilbert, in some surprise at her coldness.

"I do not know as I have," answered the girl. "If I was sure I could make a living by painting, I should like it better than anything else; but unless I took portraits, I don't suppose I could make it pay, and I don't think I could paint likenesses of people."

"Well, I'm glad you have been thinking it over so soberly, for your own sake, Rachel. I suppose you didn't get these ideas from Mrs. Farrell?" asked Mrs. Gilbert.

"Oh no! she's very hopeful, and thinks I should succeed at once."

"Humph!" commented Mrs. Gilbert. "When is your school out?"

"It ended on Friday."

"Oh, indeed! And are you going to help your mother, now?"

"Yes. She's not so well as common, this summer, and we can't get hired help—any that's worth having."

"Shall you wait on table?" asked Mrs. Gilbert, with a keen look.

"No—not just at first," said Rachel, with a little hesitation. Mrs. Gilbert lifted her eyebrows, and the girl blushed and added, "I wanted to, but mother thought it wasn't best till the boarders had forgotten about—about the—the picture."

"Your mother is right. They'll forget it sooner than you think," answered Mrs. Gilbert, looking to see if this arrow hit. But it seemed to fall blunted

from Rachel's armor; she rose and said she must bid Mrs. Gilbert good night. Mrs. Gilbert followed her to the door. "Don't think, my dear," she said, "that I meant to wound your feelings by saying that they'd soon forget your picture. Perhaps it's true. But I wanted merely to see if you'd any false pride about you. I know how to strike it, for I'm full of it myself. Good night, Rachel; I wish you'd come again. Do let me be of use to you, if I can; and tell your mother that I couldn't consent to give less than I did for Blossom. I bought it at the lowest price conscience would let me. You don't blame me for having my way about it, do you?" Rachel dropped her eyes as Mrs. Gilbert took her passive hand.

She turned, as Rachel closed the door, to her bureau, near which the girl had paused; some loose bills lay on it; a five, a two, three quarters. Mrs. Gilbert's talk had ended as it began, and she had paid two dollars and a quarter for Rachel's picture, after all, as Rachel had steadfastly meant from the first. She gave a sharp "Ah!" and flung the money on the bureau again in disgust. "The girl's granite!"

Chapter VIII

AT the best, love is fatal to friendship; the most that friendship can do is to listen to love's talk of itself and be the confident of its rapturous joys, its transports of despair. The lover fancies himself all the fonder of his friend because of his passion for his mistress, but in reality he has no longer any need of the old comrade. They cannot talk sanely and frankly together any more; there is something now that they cannot share; even if the lover desired to maintain the old affectionate relation, the mistress could not suffer it. The specter of friendship is sometimes invited to haunt the home of the lovers after marriage; but when their happiness has been flaunted in its face, when it has been shown the new house, the new china, the new carpets, the new garden, it is tacitly exorcised, and is not always called back again except to be shown the new baby. The young spouses are ever so willing to have the poor ghost remain; the wife learns whether it takes two or three lumps of sugar in its tea; the husband bids it smoke anywhere it likes, and the wife smiles a menacing acquiescence; but all the same they turn it out-of-doors. They praise it when it is gone, and they feel so much more comfortable to be alone.

Mrs. Farrell had only hastened a natural result from Easton's passion for her, which now declared itself without any of the conventional reserves. It was the degree of passion which is called a perfect infatuation by the tranquil spectator, but which probably appears a reasonable enough condition both to the subject and the object of it. In fact, there is no just cause why every woman should not reduce some man to it; it is a hardship that she cannot; in a better state of things no doubt she could.

Easton found in Mrs. Farrell's presence a relief from thoughts that troubled him when away from her; when he beheld her, or heard her speak, his bliss was so great that his heart could not harbor self-reproach; but at other times it upbraided him that he was making Gilbert wait for the explanation that was his instant due. His love had revealed to him a whole new world of rights and duties which seemed at war with those of the world he had always lived in before. This new passion claimed reverence for an ideal as exacting as that of the old friendship; and perfect loyalty to both seemed beyond him.

Gilbert neither shunned nor sought him; and it was Easton's constraint under his friend's patience that made their being together intolerable. When they met they never spoke of Mrs. Farrell, or indeed of anything but passing trifles; and Easton avoided his friend as much as he could until the inspired moment should come to do him justice; the moment which seemed to retreat farther and

farther from him the more he tasted the supreme bliss which life now held to his lip. Their affairs had come to this pass when, on Friday, Gilbert abruptly announced that he had arranged with one of the men at the hotel to spend a few days in camp on the northern side of the mountain, where the brooks were less accessible and less fished than those of West Pekin. He made no pretense of asking Easton to go with him; and he parted from him with a nod when his wagon with the camping outfit in it drove up to the door. They had often parted as carelessly, but with a difference. Easton watched the wagon out of sight, and then started toward Woodward farm with a sigh of sad relief.

He was seen coming every morning by the ladies on watch, who had made so careful a study of his face that they knew by its changes from desperate courage and endurance to all-forgetting ecstasy the very moment when he caught sight of Mrs. Farrell; and they could not help rejoicing in the perfect abandon of his loverhood. It was indeed a devotion not less than heroic, which none but a primitive soul, nurtured in high and pure ideals, could have been capable of; it was so unlike the languid dangling which they had been used to call attentions, that they could not help regarding it with a tender admiration; they were all half in love with a man who could be so wholly in love, and they began to respect the woman who could inspire such a passion. They even liked the unsparing directness with which he made it appear that he came to see Mrs. Farrell and no one else; that he cared to speak to

no other, to look at none but her; they sweetly bore, they even approved, the almost savage frankness with which he went away when she was absent. He made no pretenses of any sort; he did not bring a book as excuse for coming to see her; he had no scruple about asking her before half a piazza full of people to walk or drive with him; when he sat down beside her, in whatever presence, he always seemed to be alone with her.

She would perhaps have been satisfied with a less perfect surrender; it looked sometimes as if his worship alarmed and puzzled her; but for the most she received it in good part; and if she ever found it necessary to administer a snub, he took it with heroic patience; it plainly hurt him to his heart's core, but plainly it did not daunt him; the next day he wooed as ardently, and he never dreamed of resenting it.

They walked a good deal, the following week, to the wood where they had sat on the first Sunday among the ferns, and there he read to her, or talked to her in the freedom of a heart never opened to a woman before. Love baptizes us with a new youth whenever it comes; the talk of all lovers is like the babble of childhood, and a heavenly simpleness inspires it. This is so, whatever the number of the passion; it is true in even greater degree if first love comes when the lover is well toward his thirties. Easton was one of the most single-hearted of men, but pride had kept him one of the most reserved. Now love came, and, taking away his pride toward her he loved, seemed to leave him no re-

serve. He told her what his life had been, what his theories of life were; his likes, his dislikes; things that had happened to him as a boy at school; about his uncle who had brought him up and left him his money; that he looked like this uncle; he even told of curious dreams that he had dreamt. A load lay on his heart all the time: it was the thought of Gilbert, whom alone he would not speak of, though the talk seemed to be always drifting toward him.

They were sitting in the old place on the Saturday afternoon of the week after Gilbert's departure. Gilbert was staying longer than his sister-in-law had expected, and there had begun to be a vague wonder, not yet deepened to anxiety, at his prolonged absence, which Easton inwardly shared. He began to speak now, with the intention of talking of Gilbert, as if it would be some sort of reparation to praise him to Mrs. Farrell.

"Do you remember," he asked, "being surprised that afternoon when I told you what an idler in the world I was?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Farrell, "we were both rather foolish that afternoon," and she looked at him demurely from under her fallen lashes.

Easton laughed a flattered lover's laugh. "But you have forgiven me."

"And you me. So sweet to be forgiven!"

They both laughed, and she went on. "How funny it seems, after such a very unpromising start, that you should be sitting here with me again, and really quite tolerating me."

"Yes," he said in a hoarse undertone, "very

droll"; but he was thinking in a rapturous absence how far her word was from painting his attitude toward her. In the same sense one might tolerate the hope of heaven. Mrs. Farrell laughed again, and he smiled his happiness.

"You seem to like being laughed at better than you did at first, Mr. Easton," she said, gravely. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; perhaps it's practice. It would be a pity if we learned nothing from experience."

"Very true, very true indeed. I've no doubt you could learn a great many useful things. For instance, now you like being laughed at before your face, perhaps you will come to like being laughed at behind your back."

"I think that would be more difficult."

"Well, let us try: I laughed at you to the Woodwards that morning when you mended our broken holdback with your handkerchief. It seemed such a wanton waste of handkerchief; and you did it with the air of laying down your life, of shedding your last drop of blood, for our sakes. It was too ridiculous! There; how do you like that?"

"I don't mind it—much."

"Well, you're really getting on. Shall I tell you now how I made fun of you to Mr. Gilbert?"

The name gave Easton a shock. Gilbert had gone wholly out of his mind; but that was not the worst. He grew pale, and remained silently frowning.

"Oh dear! now I've done it again," cried Mrs.

Farrell. "I wonder which cord of your high-strung friendship I've snapped this time. I wish you'd never brought it near a plain, every-day person like me. I can weep for my crime, if that will do any good." She drew out a handkerchief, and began to make a conspicuous pretense of drying her tears. Then she dropped it, and as Easton made a movement to restore it to her he suddenly arrested himself.

"Why, this is my handkerchief," he said.

"Excuse me, Mr. Easton," retorted Mrs. Farrell with exaggerated hauteur, "the handkerchief is mine. Will you give it back, or shall I scream for help? This wood is inhabited, and a lady doesn't cry out in vain. Come, sir; my property!"

She reached forward for it, and Easton withheld it. "How came it yours?" he asked.

"Ben Woodward found it on the buggy harness two weeks ago, and brought it to me. I washed it and ironed it nicely with my own hands. 'That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give. She was a charmer, and could almost read the thoughts of people. There's magic in the web of it. A sibyl, that had numbered in the world the sun to course two hundred compasses, in her prophetic fury sewed the work.'" Mrs. Farrell declaimed the words with fire, and at the last caught quickly at the handkerchief, which Easton still held beyond her reach. Then she made a fascinating pretense of taking up a point of her over-skirt in her left hand to wipe her eyes with it as with an apron.

"What will you give me in exchange for it?"

"Nothing," she said, coldly. "Why should I wish to buy your handkerchief of you? I have enough of my own;" and while Easton looked in unguarded embarrassment at her face, to see if she were really offended or not, she caught the handkerchief from him and ran it swiftly into that fold of her dress where her pocket lurked. "Now!" she said, and looked at him with beautiful mocking.

He gave a laugh of confusion and pleasure, and, "Oh, you carry it off very well," said Mrs. Farrell.

"Where did you study Shakespeare?" he asked.

"At school, where he wasn't in the course. Look here, Mr. Easton: I think you ought to be punished, instead of rewarded, for your attempt on my handkerchief. But I am so forgiving that I can't be harsh with the basest offenders. So I am really going to let you have something in exchange for this handkerchief, and I hope you'll read it often and often." She drew her hand from her pocket and offered him a little book. "Don't you remember the book you picked up for me in the meadow? Here it is. You won't find my name in it?" She put up her hand to waive his thanks, and added, hastily: "Spare your gratitude. I want to get rid of the book. It's a constant reproach to me, and a constant reminder of my very bold behavior that day. But I couldn't help it. Oh, Mr. Easton! You *know* I left that book there so that I could come back and get a better look at you two, don't you?"

"Yes, I know that."

"And could you really pardon such a shameless trick?"

"I rather liked to have you look at me."

"Don't prevaricate! Do you approve of such actions?"

"You did it."

"Oh, but that's personal. Why, you're actually shuffling! Now, tell me whether you don't think it was very unladylike and unbecoming."

"I saw no harm in it."

"Well, you *are* large-minded. If I had been in your place I should certainly have suspected some ulterior motive."

"Like what?"

"Like what? Why, like my wanting you to see me!"

Easton merely laughed. "I hadn't thought of that," he said. Her daring was delicious; he wanted her to talk on so forever. But she sat looking at him a full minute before she spoke.

"Well," she said at last, "I don't know what to make of such mercifulness. I'm not used to it. I think I might have been different if I hadn't always been so sharply judged. What I do isn't so very bad, that I can see, but people seem to think it is awful. The only people I've ever seen who could make any allowance for me are the Woodwards. I suppose it must seem very odd to you, my being with them so much, and so little with the other boarders. But you go where you find sympathy. It seems to me I've always been alone," she said with passionate self-pity that dimmed her eyes.

She dried them with Easton's handkerchief, and turned her face away.

He could not have spoken now without pouring out his whole heart, and to speak of love to her in this mood would be like seizing an advantage which his fantastic notions of justice forbade him to take.

"You don't know what good people they are," she resumed, with her face still averted. "When I was sick with a fever here, two summers ago, they cared for me as if I were their own child. And there isn't anything I wouldn't do for them—anything! I was very sick indeed," she went on, turning her eyes upon him now, and speaking very solemnly, "and I suppose that I could not have lived without their nursing. It was in their busiest time, and they sent people away so that they could have a chance to care for me. Mr. Easton," she cried, as if fired with a generous inspiration, "you must get better acquainted with Rachel Woodward. She and you are just of a piece. She's quite as large-minded as you are, and as unsuspicious and—good. Yes, I know you're good; you needn't try to deceive me. I'm not. I'm full of vanity and vexation of spirit. I don't know what I want; I'm restless, and perturbated, and horrid. But there's nothing of that kind about Rachel Woodward; she's a born saint, and goes round accepting self-sacrifice as if it were her birthright. For all she's got such a genius for drawing, I suppose she'd settle down into a common country drudge without a murmur, if she found it in the line of duty. Duty! what is duty? It's the greatest imposition of the age, *I* think." Mrs.

Farrell had now quite emerged from her clouds, and was able to share Easton's joy in her nonsense. "I know Mr. Gilbert didn't think so kindly of my coming back after that book," she said, as if this were the natural sequence of what had gone before, and had been in her mind all the time.

Easton's embarrassment appeared in his face, but he said nothing.

"Oh well, never mind," said Mrs. Farrell, rising, "he's welcome to hate me if he likes; and I suppose he'll end by making you hate me, too. I'm sure it's very good of you to respite me so long." She gave the faintest sigh, and began to arrange her dress for walking away, looking first over one shoulder, and then over the other, at her skirt behind.

Neither of them said anything, as they quitted the place where they had been sitting, by a path that led homeward through a rocky dell, farther around than that they usually came and went by. In this dell there was a shade of maples thicker than elsewhere in the woods, and the heavy granite bowlders started from the soil in fantastic and threatening shapes, very different from the sterile repose that they kept in the neighboring fields and woods. Something of the old, elemental strife lingered there yet; the aspect of the place was wild, almost fierce; the trout-brook, that stole so still through the flat meadows on either side of the dell, quarreled along its rocky course in this narrow solitude, and filled it with a harsh din of waters. But the soil in the crevices and little spaces between the granite masses was richer than anywhere else on the farm.

Earlier in the season, wherever the sun could look through the maple boughs it saw a host of wild flowers, and in its turn the shade detained the spring, and there were still violets here in July, and the shy water plants unfolded their bloom at every point along the margin of the fretted brook where they could find foothold. No maples yielded a more bounteous sweet than these in the shrewish April weather, when the Woodward boys came and tapped their gnarled trunks; and in the lower end of the valley stood the sugar house, with its rusty iron pans and kettles, and its half-ruinous brick oven and chimney, where they boiled the sap. Because the brook perhaps ran cooler here than in the meadows, the cattle from the neighboring pastures came to drink at the pool which its waters gathered into at one place, just before it took the final fray with the rocks and broke out into the open sunlight beyond, where it lulled itself among the grassy levels. An oriole had made its nest in the boughs that overhung this pool; and higher up in the same tree lived a family of red squirrels, some member of which was pretty sure to challenge every passer. In the bushes that thickened about the meadow-border in sight of the farmhouse lived thrushes and catbirds; and in the very heart of the dell, a rain crow often voiced his lugubrious foreboding.

Mrs. Farrell entered by the vagrant path that the cattle's hoofs had made, and midway of the hollow she paused and, resting her arm on a tall bowlder, looked round the place with a certain joy

in her face, as of kindred wildness. Her rich eyes glowed, her bosom rose, and her breaths were full and deep. If she could indeed have been some wild, sylvan thing, with no amenability to our criterions, one could not have asked more of her than to be as she was; but behind her came a man who loved her as a woman, and whose heart was building from its hopes of her that image of possession and of home which love bids the most hapless passion cherish. When he came up with her he looked into her face and said, as if no silence had followed her last speech, his thoughts had been so voluble to him, "Why do you talk to me about hating you?"

"Why?" she echoed with a look of alarm, and signs of that inward trepidation which every woman must feel at such a moment. "Oh," she added, with a weak effort to jest fate aside, "I suppose that I thought you ought to hate me."

"No," said Easton, with a passionate force that nothing could have stayed, "you know I love you!"

Her dark bloom went, but in an instant came again, with what swiftly blended emotions no man may guess and possibly no woman could tell, and "How can you say such a thing to me?" she demanded with the imperiousness of fear. "You—you hardly know me—it's hardly a week since we met."

"A week? What does it matter? I have never loved any other woman; I know that you are free to love me, if you can; I don't care for any other knowledge of you. Oh, don't answer me yet! Listen: I don't ask you to love me now; what

right have I to do that? But only let me love you! I can wait. I can be silent, if you say so. You are my whole life, and my whole life is yours, if you choose to make me wait so long. How could it be better spent?"

She sank down upon a shelf of rock beside that she had leaned upon, and he fell at her feet, and then with the unsparingness of love which claims nothing and takes all, "Oh, my darling!" he murmured, and stretched his arms toward her.

She stayed him with a little electric touch. "Don't!" she whispered, and after a look at him she hid her face.

He did not move; his attitude did change, but still expressed his headlong hope, as if a sculptor had caught it in immutable stone; but when she drew out his handkerchief and, pressing it to her eyes, handed it to him and said, with trembling lips, "Take it; give me my book," a terrible despair blanched his face.

"Oh!" he moaned.

"Yes," she said, "I must be free. I can't think if I'm not free;" and she put the book, which he mechanically surrendered, into her pocket.

"You shall be as free of me as you will," he answered. "I ask nothing of you—only leave to love you. I will go away, if you say it. I must be to blame for speaking, if it gives you so much pain. I would rather have died than hurt you."

An imploring humility, an ineffable tenderness evoked by her trouble, shook his voice. She did not answer at once, but, "You are not to blame;

I should be very ungrateful and very cruel to suffer it," she said, after a while, "but, oh, I'm afraid that *I* must have been behaving very badly, very boldly, to make you talk so to me, so soon. I'm afraid," she said, bowing her head, "that you don't respect me—that you think I was trying to make you care for me."

"Respect you!" he echoed. "I *love* you."

"Yes, yes, I know that. But it isn't the same thing!"

He stood bewildered, where he had risen from her feet, and looked down into her face, which she now lifted toward him. "If I had been another kind of woman, you wouldn't have said it to me!"

"No; if you had been other than you are, I should not have loved you," said the young man, gravely.

"Oh, I don't mean that. I mean— Oh, Mr. Easton, what is it you find to love in me? What did I ever do or say that you ought to love me? Why *do* you love me?"

"I don't know. Because—you are—you are my love."

"Is it my looks you care for?"

"Your looks? Yes, you are beautiful. I hadn't thought of that."

"But if I wasn't, you would never have cared for me."

"How can I tell? I have no reasons. You are the one human creature in all the world whose being or doing I can't question. You are what I love, whatever you are."

"Is it true? How strange!" said Mrs. Farrell. "And if I had always been very cold and reserved and stiff with you, and not come back after that book, and not let you take a hairpin out of my chignon, and not made mischief between you and your friend, and not been so ready to walk and ride with you in season and out of season, and not rather—well!—*cut up* with you to-day about that handkerchief, would you have loved me all the same?"

She was still looking very seriously into his face, so very seriously that he could not help the smile that the contrast of her words and mien brought to his lips.

"Don't! Don't laugh!" she pleaded piteously. "I'm trying to get at something."

"But there is nothing, nothing for you to get at!" he cried out. "If I tried forever, I could only say at last that I love you."

"Yes, but you oughtn't to," said Mrs. Farrell, with a sigh. "You don't know anything about me. You don't know who or what I am." She restrained a movement of impatience on his part. "I'm not at all like other people. My father was nothing but a ship's captain, and he had been a common sailor; and he ran off with my mother, I've heard, and they were married against her parents' will. I can remember how handsome he was, with blue eyes and a yellow beard, and how he used to swear at the men—I went a voyage with him once after my mother died. I was brought up at a convent school in Canada, along with the half sisters of Mr.

Farrell, who owned my father's ship; and when I came out he married me. I didn't love him; no, I never pretended to; he was too old. But I married him, and I would have been a good enough wife, I believe, but he died; he died very soon after we were married. I never said so, but I was sorry that he should die, for he was very good to me; and yet I was glad to be free again. There, Mr. Easton, that's all about me."

Apparently this history had not given his passion the pause of a single pulse. She was all that she had been to him, or more; his face showed that.

"Well?" she asked, triumphantly.

"Then you don't forbid me to love you?" he questioned in turn.

"Oh, I ought to! You are too generous and too good for me! No, no, you mustn't love me. I should be sure to bring harm upon you. It was all true about Mr. Farrell, but it wasn't about my father. In his last years he joined the church, and he used to pray in the cabin to be forgiven for swearing on deck. So I'm not so bad as I said, but I'm not good enough for you to love."

"Won't you let me judge of that?" asked Easton, with a smile, too happy to do else, whatever name she had given herself. He crouched again at her feet, near the base of the flat rock on which she had sunk, and while he spoke she looked beamingly upon him. "I could parade a few defects of my own," he said, "but just now I am anxious to have you think all the good of me that you can; I shall be infinitely far from good enough."

"No, no; don't do that. I want you to tell me something very disgraceful of yourself. If you don't make yourself out the blackest kind of character, I shall not let you care for me."

"Another time; not now."

"Yes, now. Come."

Easton laughed. "I can't think of anything heinous enough for your purpose on such short notice."

"Oh, Mr. Easton! Do you mean to say that you have never done anything to be ashamed of? Have you nothing on your conscience? What was that thing you said you oughtn't to have done to Mr. Gilbert?"

The shadow of his lurking remorse fell over the bliss of the lover's face, and he gave a sigh like those we heave when we wake from the forgetfulness of care to the remembrance of it. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mrs. Farrell. "If you'd been guilty of something really shabby, I should have felt more at home with you; but no matter, even if it isn't strictly disgraceful. Go on."

Easton did not laugh. "Yes, I will tell you," he said; nevertheless, he did not tell her at once; he fell into a moody, unhappy silence, from which he suddenly started.

"I told you once before," he began, "when I didn't mean to tell you anything, that Gilbert and I were in the army together. I knew nothing of the business, and I chose to enter the ranks, where I should at least do no harm to the cause I wanted

to serve. Gilbert was my captain; we had not known each other before; but he had known of me, and he made a point of finding me out among those poor fellows, and in spite of the gulf fixed between officers and men, he made himself my friend at once; we were younger than we are now—"

"How interesting!" said Mrs. Farrell; "it's quite like a love-affair."

"And after our first engagement he urgently recommended me and I got a lieutenant's commission in another company of our regiment. The next battle vacated the captaincy above me."

"Do you mean that the officer above you was killed?"

"That's the way most promotions are got."

"Well, it's shocking! I don't see how you could accept it. To profit by the death of others!"

Easton winced. "Oh," he said, bitterly, "I did worse than that. Our general was killed, and the colonel who took his place as brigade commandant had an old feud with Gilbert—something that had begun before the war. I don't know whether he planned to strike him with my hand, when he saw what friends we were, or whether it was a sudden, infernal inspiration. But just as we were going into action he detached Gilbert for staff duty; we were fighting on toward the end of the war by that time, and there had been many changes and losses, so that I now stood next to him in seniority, and took his place in the regiment. The colonel and the lieutenant-colonel were killed, and I brought the remnant of the regiment out as well as I could.

The colonel commanding had been a truckling politician at home, and he never took his hands off the wires that work officeholders."

Easton stopped, and it seemed as if he did not mean to go on, the absence which he fell into was so long. He stared at her with a look of pain, when recalled by an eager "Well?" from Mrs. Farrell.

"It all fell out with such malignant fatality that I don't think that part of it could have been planned. But one day Gilbert and I sat talking before his tent, and an orderly came up with an official letter for me. Gilbert made a joke of pretending to open it; I told him to go on, and then he opened it and looked at what was in it. He handed me the inclosure without a word: it was my commission as colonel; I had been advanced two steps over his head."

Mrs. Farrell broke out, with a pitiless frankness that seemed to strike Easton like a blow, "I don't see how he could forgive you!"

Easton passed his hand over his face. "It was a great deal to forgive; if it hadn't seemed to make us closer friends, I should say it was too much to forgive; that such a thing ought to have separated us at once and forever."

"Well," said Mrs. Farrell, "I don't understand how you got over it. What did you do? What did you say?"

"I hardly know," answered Easton, gloomily, "what I did or said. I wanted to tear the commission to pieces and leave the service. But Gilbert

said I hadn't any right to refuse the promotion, I hadn't any right to leave the army; and he added things about my fitness for the place, and my duty. If I declined this commission, he should not get it; but if he could get it, what sort of face could he carry it off with? What we must do was not to let it make bad blood between us. There was a great deal more talk, but it all came to that in the end. He might often have had promotion after that in many ways—in other regiments recruiting or reorganizing—but he refused everything; he even refused the brevet that was offered him after the war; he said he had some doubts about this, for he knew what I had done to have his case made known and justice done him. But if I didn't mind, he said, he would rather stay what he was. He didn't go into the army for glory."

"How grand!" said Mrs. Farrell.

"Yes," returned Easton, sadly, "it was grand enough."

"But, after all," she said, "I don't know why you shouldn't be at peace about it now. It's all over and done with, long ago. Besides, you thought you did right, didn't you?"

"Yes. But in such a case, one ought to do wrong," said Easton, sadly.

Mrs. Farrell laughed. "Oh, well," said she, "you did wrong to let me surprise the weak place in your friendship, and that makes it just right. Why, Mr. Easton!" she exclaimed "are you actually worried about that silly business?"

Easton did not answer.

"You're rather too sensitive, I think."

"Excuse me," said Easton. "A man needn't be very sensitive to dislike to exploit himself at the expense of a friend who has already forgiven him too much."

"But why don't you *tell* him you didn't?" demanded Mrs. Farrell, in amazement. "Why don't you tell him that I got it out of you—what little you said—before you knew what you were talking about?"

"Why? How could I do that?" asked Easton, in as great amaze.

"Easily!" retorted Mrs. Farrell, with enthusiasm. "Don't mind me! Why, if such a man as that had liked me, and I had offended him, there isn't anyone I wouldn't sacrifice, there isn't anything so shabby I wouldn't do, to get into his good graces again. Why, he's sublime, don't you know. Who would ever have thought he was that sort of man?"

Easton fell into a somber reverie from which even her presence could not save him; for the wretched moment he forgot her presence, and her voice seemed to be coming from a long way off as she bent down her face and peered into his with a sidelong, mock-serious glance.

"Don't let me intrude upon your thoughts, Mr. Easton. I can wait till you're quite at leisure for my answer."

"Your answer?"

"Yes. Or no, it was *you* who wanted an answer —about something, wasn't it? Oh, Mr. Easton!

'Was ever woman in such humor wooed?
Was ever woman in such humor won?'

It's a good thing I'm not proud. Come, begin over again. I'm quite ready to be persuaded that you're still perishing of unrequited affection for me."

Easton gave a sigh of torment. She dropped her mocking manner and said with an earnest air, "You are thinking of the matter too morbidly. It isn't any such hopeless affair. You must speak to Mr. Gilbert and show him that no wrong was meant, and if you sacrifice yourself from any foolish idea of sparing me, I shall never forgive you. He won't care for what I've done to make trouble; he hates me, anyway; and then you can both go away as good as new—and forget me."

"I shall never go away," said Easton, "till you send me, and I shall never forget you while I live."

"No? I thought you had forgotten me just now. Well, you had better go away; I don't send you, but you had better go; and you had better forget me. Your fortnight is just up to-day: better go to-day. Come, here are both my hands for good-by. When you've put two hundred miles between us, perhaps you can think more clearly about it all."

He took her hands, which she held out to him, smiling, and bowed his lips upon them in the utter surrender of his love.

"Why, you are really in my hands," she murmured. A light of triumph burned in her dark eyes, but one could not have said that as a woman she had not a right to the few and fleeting triumphs that love gives her sex, on which it lays so many

heavy burdens. "Then," she said, "you must do as I bid you. Come, let me go, now;" and she withdrew her hands and rose to her feet, and flung her shawl over her arm. "You must not talk of liking me, any more, till you are friends with Gilbert again. You may make up with him how and when you will, but you must not speak to me till you tell me you are reconciled. I can't forgive myself till I know that you've made up at my expense. Tell him that it piqued and irritated me to see you such friends, and that I could not rest till I had got a clew to your secret; that I didn't really mean any harm; but that I was altogether to blame. Will you obey?"

"No!" said Easton, so fiercely that Mrs. Farrell started with a sudden shock of panic that left no trace of persiflage in her tone, while she walked humbly before him with downcast head. How could he be angry with her? His whole heart yearned upon her as they moved on through the hollow, and came from its gloom at last upon the open meadow. "I didn't mean to offend you," she added, then. "I was only trying to show you how much in earnest I was about having you and Gilbert friends again; I couldn't be happy if I thought I had hurt your feelings."

"I will obey you," said Easton, sadly.

"You will make up with him?" she asked.

"If he will let me. God knows I want to do it."

"Then you may spare me all you like. You're not angry now?"

"Only with myself."

"And you're going to be real patient with me, about—that little answer?"

"As patient as you can ask."

"Because," she explained, "we have scarcely the advantage of each other's acquaintance as yet"; and added, "I would rather you wouldn't go back to the farm with me, to-day. I'm afraid," she said, glancing at him, "that you'll look as if you had been saying something. Those women have got such sharp eyes! Should you care if you left me at the corner of the lane and let me walk to the house alone? Shouldn't you, really? And you don't think it's asking too much?"

"It would be too much if anyone else asked me to leave you sooner than I must. But it's for you to command."

"I don't command," said Mrs. Farrell. Just then they came upon a rise in the meadow, which showed the road and Rachel Woodward walking down toward the red schoolhouse. "Oh, how lucky!" cried Mrs. Farrell. "Rachel, Rachel!" she called, "wait!" and Rachel stopped till they joined her. "I want to go with you to the schoolhouse. May Mr. Easton come, too?" she asked, with a glance at him.

"I won't put Miss Woodward to the pain of refusing. I think I shall find my friend Gilbert at the hotel, about this time, and I want to see him."

Mrs. Farrell rewarded his surprising duplicity with a brave, strong clasp of the hand, said heartily, "Good-by," and turned away with Rachel, while he walked slowly, with his head down, in the other

direction. She had not gone far when she stopped and looked back at him over her shoulder, holding her dress out of the dust with one hand; but he did not turn to look at her, and presently a downward slope of the road hid him.

"He's handsome enough, I should hope," said Mrs. Farrell, only half to Rachel, who made no comment, and Mrs. Farrell asked, "What have you been doing, all the week? I've scarcely had a chance to speak to you."

"No," said Rachel. "I don't like walking in the woods so much as you do, and I haven't time for it."

"Rachel!" cried Mrs. Farrell, with affected sternness, "do you mean anything personal? I won't have it, ma'am. Withdraw those vile insinuations. Do you wish to imply that I have gone walking in the woods with Mr. Easton? How very unkind of you, Rachel! But I forgive you; this sarcastic habit of yours is one of the eccentricities of genius. Here we are at the little sanctuary itself. How nicely it will read in the newspapers when you exhibit your first cattle-piece in Boston:

"During the summer, the fair artist, having dismissed her little flock of pupils, consecrated the red schoolhouse at the corner of the road to the labors of her genius, devoting to them such moments as she could steal from household cares and the demands of her mother's boarders, who little dreamt with what visions of beauty and fame she glorified the dim old farmhouse kitchen, albeit she was familiarly known among them as the Rosa Bonheur of West Pekin, and they duly reverenced her God-given talent.

There!" triumphed Mrs. Farrell, falling into her natural tone from that in which she had seemed to

read these sentences aloud, "that's from 'a lady correspondent,' and anybody could tell that Mrs. Stevenson wrote it. *Now*, will you say anything about my walking with Mr. Easton? Rachel!" she exclaimed, as the girl answered nothing, "have I trodden on some of your outlying sensibilities? Oh, I'm ever so sorry!" and she fell upon her like a remorseful wolf and devoured her with kisses. "There, I forgive you again. I've got my hand in —been forgiving Mr. Easton the whole afternoon."

Rachel made no response, but when Mrs. Farrell had sufficiently wreaked her regret upon her she felt in her pocket for the schoolhouse key. "Why, I've come without it!" she exclaimed, in dismay.

"Splendid!" returned Mrs. Farrell; "that will oblige us to break in, and I've always had an ungratified taste for burglary. It won't do for us to be seen getting in at the *front* window; it wouldn't be professional; we must go round to the back," she said, leading the way, while Rachel followed.

"It's fastened with a stick from the frame to the top of the lower sash, and it's no use trying to get in," said the girl.

"Oh, isn't it!" retorted Mrs. Farrell. "Have you brought your knife?"

She took the knife, and half opened the blade, when it snapped to again, and she flung it away with a shriek and looked to see if it had cut her finger. "I'm still in one piece, I'm thankful to say," she said, presently; "but you open the knife, Rachel." She took it again, and, sliding the blade vertically between the upper and lower sash, sent

the fastening flying out upon the floor. "That's a little trick I read of, once," she said, handing the open knife back to Rachel, and throwing up the sash.

The next moment she gave her two strong arms to Rachel and helped her in; and then she went straight to the teacher's desk, took out a portfolio, and pinned about the walls the sketches that she found in it, Rachel making no resistance.

"Why it *is*—quite like a studio, Rachel," she said, and made a show of conscientiously examining each of the sketches in turn.

At last she came to one from which she abruptly turned with the tragic appeal of "Rachel!" It was the first of a series of three, and it represented Mrs. Farrell seated at the foot of a rock and turning an anxious face to confront Blossom's visage thrust through the birch-trees, with a mildly humorous gleam in her great calm eyes, as if she relished the notion of having been mistaken for a man. The next represented Blossom driven from her shelter, and at a few paces distant indignantly regarding Gilbert and Easton, who had just appeared, while Mrs. Farrell and Rachel were shown sailing down the meadow with extravagant swiftness. The third was Mrs. Farrell confronting Easton, to whom she had returned to claim her book; Blossom looked on with grave surprise. The cow's supposed thoughts, and feelings were alone suggested; the figures of the men were caricatures, and the fashionableness and characteristic beauty of Mrs. Farrell were extremely burlesqued.

"Oh, this is how you spend your time, is it?" she asked.

"I thought I would have something ready to exhibit if I went to Boston this winter," said Rachel, very demurely. "Do you like the subjects?"

"This circumscribes me fearfully," said Mrs. Farrell, not heeding the question. "I can never snub you any more, Rachel. From this moment I'm afraid of you. I'm not hurt or angry; I'm frightened. Aren't they splendid?" she asked, joyously, of Rachel, as if they were two indifferent connoisseurs of the work. "You've got me exactly; and Blossom, why, she looks perfectly shocked. Anybody can see what an unsophisticated cow *she* is; you're a country cow, Blossom, or you wouldn't be astonished at such an innocent little maneuver as that. Your men are not so good as your cows and women, Rachel. Mr. Easton isn't such a stick as that; you know he isn't. Oh, Rachel," said Mrs. Farrell, sinking upon a seat behind a school desk and leaning her elbow on it, chin in hand, while she brooded on the last sketch with effective eyes, "how awfully embarrassing men are! Here is Mr. Easton, for example, who has known me a week—a week but barely two—and guess what he's been saying to me this afternoon!" She changed her posture and sat with her hands in her lap, regarding Rachel as one does the person whom one has posed with a conundrum.

"Why, I don't know," said Rachel, in a voice as faint as the blush on her cheek.

"Not," resumed Mrs. Farrell, "that he seems to

consider it at all precipitate! I've had to fight it off ever since last Sunday; I've no doubt he thinks he's waited a proper time, as they say of widowers. Why, Rachel, he's been making love to me, that's what."

Rachel hung down her head a little, as if the confidence scared her, and played with a corner of some paper on the desk before her, but she did not say anything. She was not apparently surprised, but silenced.

"Well," said Mrs. Farrell, after a while, "haven't you any observations to offer, Rachel? What should you do to him if you were in my place? Come!"

"I should think you would know," faltered the girl, "if you liked him."

"Like him? Oh, *don't* I like a blond, regular-featured young man of good mind and independent property, and no more pretense than—well, say *pie*, for instance! But that isn't the question. The question is whether I ought to marry such a man. Yes, I really think I have a scruple or two, on this point. I *do* love him—sort of. But, oh dear me! I don't suppose I love him rightly, or enough of it. I could imagine myself doing it. I can see myself," said Mrs. Farrell, half-closing her eyes as if to examine the scene critically, "in some moods that I could love him with unutterable devotion in. But I should have to have something tremendous to draw me out; a ten-horse-power calamity; and then perhaps I shouldn't *stay* drawn out. It brings the tears into my eyes to think how, if he had lost the

use of his limbs, say, and we were dreadfully poor, I would slave myself to the bone for his sake—for about ten minutes! But a saint, a hero in perfect repair, with plenty of money, it's quite another thing."

"If you were ever in earnest, Mrs. Farrell," said Rachel, sternly, "you ought to be afraid to talk as you do."

"Why, so I am, aunty—so I am," retorted Mrs. Farrell, incorrigibly. "It sends the cold chills over me to talk as I do, but I can't help it. Don't you suppose I know how nice Mr. Easton is? I do. He is the very soul of truth and honor and all uprightness. He is the noblest and best man in the world. But what could I do with him, or he with me? No, ma'am, it isn't such a simple affair as liking or not liking. This is a case of conscience, I'd have you to know, such as doesn't often turn up in West Pekin."

Mrs. Farrell rose and made some tragic paces across the schoolroom floor to where the girl sat, and fell on her knees before her, having with a great show of neatness arranged a bit of paper to kneel upon. She took Rachel's hands in her own, and with uplifted face implored, "Advise me, my friend," which rendered the girl helpless with laughter.

"Oh, for shame, for shame, Mrs. Farrell!" she said, when she could get breath; "you make fun of everything."

"No, no, Rachel, I don't! I never made fun of Mr. Easton. Would you like to know how he behaved when he made love to me? No? Well, you

shall. Now, you are the fatally beautiful Mrs. Farrell, and you're sitting on a rock in the hollow near the sugar house. Your head is slightly downcast, so—yes, very good—and you are twiddling the handle of your sun umbrella and poking the point of it into the dirt. Mr. Easton is standing before you with his arms folded thus—ahem!—waiting life or death at your hands." She folded her arms, and gave that intensely feminine interpretation of a man's port and style which is always so delicious. "'Oh, Mr. Easton,' you are faltering, 'I am afraid that you have deceived yourself in me; I am indeed. I am not at all the party you think you love. I was—listen!—I was changed at nurse. She whom you love, the real Mrs. Farrell, is my twin sister, and the world knows her as—Rachel Woodward!'"

Rachel had been struggling to release herself from a position so scandalous; but Mrs. Farrell, who had never risen from her knees, had securely hemmed her in. At the climax of the burlesque the girl flung herself back and gave way to a rush of sobs and tears. Mrs. Farrell attempted to throw her arms about her and console her, but Rachel shrank resolutely aside. "Don't touch me!" she cried, when she could speak. "It's horrible! You have no pity; you have no heart! You have no peace of yourself, and you are never at rest unless you are tormenting some one else. I wish you would go away from our house and never come back again!"

Mrs. Farrell rose from her knees, all her jesting

washed away, for that moment, at least, by this torrent of feeling from a source habitually locked under an icy discipline.

"Rachel," she said, "do you really hate me?"

"No," said the girl, fiercely. "If I hated you I could bear it! Nothing is sacred to you. You only care for yourself and your own pleasure, and you don't care how you make others suffer, so you please yourself."

"Yes, I do, Rachel," said Mrs. Farrell, humbly. "I know I'm selfish. But I do care for you, and I'm very, very sorry that I've wounded you. You needn't forgive me; I don't deserve it, but I'm sorry all the same."

The afternoon was waning when they came into the schoolhouse, and now a level ray of the setting sun struck across Rachel's head, fallen on the desk before her, and illumined Mrs. Farrell's stricken beauty. They sat there till after the sunset had faded away. Then Mrs. Farrell went softly about the room, taking down the sketches, which she brought and laid before Rachel. The girl lifted her head and took out the three sketches in which Mrs. Farrell figured, and, tearing them in pieces, thrust them into the stove which stood, red with rust, in the middle of the room. She would not let Mrs. Farrell help her out of the window, and that lady followed her meekly homeward when they left the schoolhouse.

Before she slept she came and knocked at Mrs. Farrell's door, and entered in response to her cheerful "Come in, come in!"

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Rachel," said Mrs. Farrell, who was lying on her lounge, reading Shakespeare. "Do sit down and visit;" and she shut her book and rose upon her elbow.

"No," said Rachel, stiffly, as she stood shading with one hand the kerosene lamp she held in the other, "I have come to say that I think I have treated you badly; for whatever you did, I had no right to say the things to you that I said. I—"

"Oh, never mind about that," said Mrs. Farrell. "*You're* all right. I dare say it was all true enough. But what I can't understand is this, Rachel: when I've been doing anything wrong, I'm as sorry as can be, and I have no rest till I go off and make a glib apology. That's as it should be, of course, but it isn't like your repentance. You've been abusing me, frightfully, and you come here and fire your regrets into the air, so to speak; you don't seem to care whether they hit me or not; you discharge 'em, and there you are all nicely, with a perfectly clean conscience. Well now, you know, when I apologize to any one, I like to see the apology hit them; I like to see them writhe and quiver under it, and go down before it, and I feel a good deal wickeder after I've repented than I did before. What do you suppose is the reason?"

Rachel made no reply, and Mrs. Farrell seemed not to have expected any. She went on: "Well, now, I'll tell you what *I* think it is; I think it's sense of duty. I'm sorry when I'm sorry because it's so very uncomfortable to think of people suffering; it's like stepping on something that

squirms; but when *you're* sorry, it's because you've done wrong. There! Now I'm going to keep that distinction clearly in mind, and go in for a sense of duty—at the earliest opportunity."

Mrs. Farrell fell back upon her lounge with an air of refreshment and relief, which nobody could resist, and Rachel laughed a reluctant, protesting laugh, while the other kept a serious face.

"Crimps, I suppose," she mused, aloud, "would be very unbecoming to a person who was going in for a sense of duty, and I must give them up. I ought to have my hair brushed perfectly flat in front, and I shall come down with it so to breakfast. I wonder how I shall look?" She went to the bureau, took a brush, and smoothed down the loose hair above her forehead; then holding it on either side with her hands to keep it down she glanced into the mirror. "Oh, oh, oh!" she cried out with a great laugh, "I look slyer than anything in the world! No! A sense of duty will never do for me. I must chance it with unregenerate nature. But you can't say after this that I didn't *try* to be good, can you, Rachel?" She put her hand on Rachel's cheek and pressed the girl's head against her breast, while she looked down into her clear eyes. "I do love you, Rachel, and I'm glad you felt sorry for having flown out at me. *I* didn't mean anything—I didn't indeed;" and she tenderly kissed Rachel good night.

Chapter IX

IT had been rather too warm on Saturday. On Sunday the breeze that draws across Woodward farm almost all summer long, from over the shoulder of Scatticong, had fallen, and the leaves of the maples along the roadside and in the grove beyond the meadow hung still as in a picture; the old Lombardy poplars at the gate shook with a faint, nervous agitation. Up the valley came the vast bath of the heat, which inundated the continent and made that day memorable for suffering and sudden death. In the cities there were sunstrokes at ten o'clock in the morning; some who kept withindoors perished from exhaustion when the sun's fury was spent. The day was famous for the heat by the seashore, where the glare from the smooth levels of the salt seemed to turn the air to flame; at the great mountain resorts, the summer guests, sweltering among the breathless tops and valleys, longed for the sea.

Easton lay awake all night, and at dawn dressed and watched the morning gray turn to clear rose, and heard the multitude of the birds sing as if it were still June; then he lay down in his clothes again, and, meaning to wait till he could go out and sit in the freshness of the daybreak, fell asleep.

When he woke, the sun was high in his window and the room was full of a sickly heat. He somehow thought Gilbert had come back, but he saw, by a glance through the door standing ajar, that his room was yet empty.

After breakfast, which could be only a formality on such a morning, even for a man not in love, he went out on the gallery of the hotel, and, as he had done the first Sunday, watched the people going to church. The village folk came as usual, but the bell brought few of the farmers and their wives. The meadows were veiled in a thin, quivering haze of heat; far off, the hilltops seemed to throb against the sky.

Easton saw the Woodwards drive up to the church; but Mrs. Farrell was not with them. He had not meant to go, even if she had come; yet it was a disappointment not to see her come. He went indoors and looked listlessly about the office, which had once been a barroom, and could not have been so dreary in its wicked days as now. Its manners had not improved with its morals. It was stained with volleys adventurously launched in the direction of a spittoon, it smelled of horse and hostler, and it was as dull as a water cooler, a hotel register, a fragment of circus bill, a time-table of the Pekin & Scatticong Railroad, can make a place. Easton went and sat upon the gallery till the people came out of church and dispersed; then he abruptly left the porch and struck out through the heat, across the graveyard and along the top of a bare ridge of pasture, toward the woods that lay be-

tween the village and Woodward farm. He could think of no other place to pass the time but that which had yesterday heard him say he loved her. The whole affair had taken a dozen different phases during the night, as he turned from side to side in his sleeplessness. Once he had even beheld her in that character of arch-flirt in which Gilbert had denounçed her. He saw a reckless design in what she had done, a willful purpose to test her power upon them both. But for the instant that this doubt lasted he did not cease to love her, to feel her incomparable charm. However she had wronged them, he could not do otherwise than remain true to her against every consequence. His love, which had seemed to spring into full life at the first sight of her, had been poisoned from the very beginning by the suspicion of others, and every day since then she had said or done things that were capable of being taken in the sense of consciously insolent caprice; yet all her audacity might be innocent in the very measure of its excess; and there was mixed with that potential slight toward her in his heart such tenderness and sweet delight, such joy in her beauty, grace, and courage, that every attempt to analyze her acts or motives ended in a rapturous imagination of her consent to be loved by him. He could not help feeling that she had not discouraged him; he excused the delay which she had imposed; how, when he thought of the conditions which she had made, could he doubt her goodness or fail to know her regret? He went, thinking, on toward the spot he was seeking, and

sometimes he walked very swiftly and sometimes he found he had stopped stock still, under the blazing sun, in attitudes of perplexity and musing. When at last he entered the dell, from the field on which they had yesterday emerged, drops of perspiration rolled down his forehead, and the shadow of the place had a sultriness of its own, in which his breath came almost as faintly as in the open sunshine of the meadows. He went toward the pool where the cattle drank, and bathed his face; then, seeking out that shelf of rock where she had sat, he laid himself down on the ledge below it and fondly strove to make her seem still there.

He fell into a deep reverie, in which he was at first sensible of a great fatigue, and then of a lightness and ease of heart such as he had not felt for the whole week past. While he lay in this tranquillity, he seemed to see Gilbert and Mrs. Farrell come laughing and talking up the glen together: Gilbert was dressed in his suit of white flannel, but she wore a gown of dark crimson silk, stiff with its rich texture, and trailing after her on the gray rocks and over the green ferns. Her head was bare, and in the dark folds of her hair was wound a string of what seemed red stones at first, like garnets in color, but proved, as she came nearer, to be the translucent berries of a poisonous vine. When she saw that they had caught his eye, she took Gilbert by the hand and called out to Easton, "Now you can't escape. He's going to make up with you whether you will or no. I've told him everything and he understands. Isn't it so—

Major?" They looked at each other, and, with a swift, significant glance at Easton, burst into a laugh, which afflicted him with inexpressible shame and pain. He shuddered as Gilbert took him in his arms in token of reconciliation, and then he found himself in a clutch from which he could not escape. Mrs. Farrell had vanished, but "Easton, Easton!" he heard the voice of Gilbert saying, "what's the matter?" And opening his eyes, he found his friend kneeling over him and looking anxiously into his face.

"I've been asleep, haven't I?" he asked, stupidly.

"Yes, and going it on rather a high-stepping nightmare," answered Gilbert, with his old smile. "Better have a little dip at the brook;" and Easton mechanically obeyed. He drew out his handkerchief to dry his face, and knew by the perfume it shed that it was the handkerchief Mrs. Farrell had restored. His heart somehow ached as he inhaled its fragrance, and he felt the old barrier, which had not existed for the moment, re-established between himself and Gilbert. He came and sat down constrainedly where he had been lying.

"I hope you won't be the worse, my dear fellow, for your little nap," said Gilbert. "Fortunately, there isn't a spot in the universe where a man could take cold to-day."

"I think I'm all right," said Easton, and he looked down, to avoid Gilbert's eyes.

Gilbert continued to gaze at him with the amused smile of patronage which people wear at the sight

of one not yet wholly emerged from the mist of dreams, and waited for a while before he spoke again. Then he said, "Easton, if you're perfectly awake, I wish you'd hear me say what a very extraordinary kind of ass I think I've been for the past week or so."

Easton looked up, and there was his friend holding out his hand to him and gazing at him with shining eyes. He could not say anything, but he took the hand and pressed it as he had that day when they had pledged each other not to let harm come between them.

"Confound it!" Gilbert went on, "I knew all the time that I was wrong, but I had to get away before I could face the thing and fairly look it out of countenance."

"Did you have a good time?" asked Easton, his voice husky with the emotion to which he refused sentimental utterance.

"Glorious! But I missed you awfully, old fellow —after I'd made it all right with you—and I wish you had been with me. The trout bit like fish that had nothing on their consciences; and there was an old couple over there near the lake who supplied me with bread and milk; they could have gone into your Annals just as they are, without a change of clothing. They had three sons killed in the last fight before Petersburg; I'll tell you all about them."

"You're back later than you expected," said Easton.

"Yes; I wanted a few nights more on the pine

boughs, and so we waited for an early start this morning. We broke camp about four o'clock, and started for West Pekin with the sun. But he beat us. I never knew heat like it; it was a good thing for me that I had been toughened by a few days outdoors. We stopped for a wash in a brook about three miles back on the road, and then we steamed along again. I reached the hotel pretty soon after you left, and put on the thinnest clothes I had; and then I started for the farm. They had spied you making in this direction, and their information was so accurate that I hadn't any trouble in finding you."

In spite of a visible effort to be at ease there was a note of constraint in Gilbert's voluble talk, and he seemed eager to find some matter not personal to them. He recurred to those old people at the lake, and told about them; he described the place where he had camped; he gave characteristic stories of the man whom he had taken with him and whose whole philosophy of life he had got at in the last three days.

At the end of it all Easton said: "I'm glad you don't think I meant you any harm, Gilbert, and I've wanted to tell you so. But for once in my life I didn't seem to be able to do the thing I ought. I couldn't understand my own action. It was mortifying to think that I could have been so little myself as to have talked of that matter, and I was ashamed to recur to it; I couldn't. I don't see now what I can say. There *is* nothing to say except that I was entirely guiltless in wounding you, and that I am altogether to blame for it."

Gilbert smiled at the paradox. "Oh, never mind it, Easton; I tell you it's all right. I really saw the thing in its true light at first; and if the devil hadn't been in me, I shouldn't have mentioned it. Nobody blames *you*."

There was ever so slight an implication of superiority in the last words which stung Easton, however unmeant he knew it to be, and he rejoined anxiously, "Yes, but I *was* to blame; it's unjust *not* to blame me."

Gilbert had thrown himself back on the flat rock, and was looking at the leaves above, with the back of his head resting in the hollow of his clasped hands. He turned his face a little toward Easton, and asked, with a smile: "Aren't you making it a little difficult? Let it all go, my dear old fellow. There never *was* anything of it. Why should we make something of it now?"

"How can I let it go?" cried Easton. "I either wronged you and was to blame, or else was not to blame because I was simply the helpless means of wronging you. It leaves me in a very cruel position; I must refuse your forgiveness or accept it at the cost of one who was entirely innocent. If I let it go as it is, I skulk behind a woman, who, as far as you are concerned, was really the victim of my own folly and weakness."

Gilbert rose to a sitting posture and looked coldly at his friend. "I want you to take notice," he said, "that I have mentioned no one, that I have tried to pass the matter *all* over. You have no right to put it as you do." His eyes began to

flash, and he went on recklessly, "And if you come to talk of cruel positions, I leave you to say what you can for a man who will let his friend go as long as you have let me go, without saying the word that might have removed his sense of a cruelly injurious slight."

Easton hung down his head. "I have nothing to say in my defense."

"Oh!" groaned Gilbert. "I beg your pardon; I do indeed, Easton. I didn't mean to say that."

"It makes very little difference whether you say or think your contempt of me," rejoined Easton, gloomily. "It can't be greater than the contempt I feel for myself."

He looked so piteously abased, so hopelessly humiliated, that Gilbert came and laid his arm across his shoulder—the nearest that an American can come to embracing his friend. "Look here, let's stop this thing right here, or it will get the upper hand of us in another minute. Come, now, I won't make another apology if you won't! Is it quits?"

Easton caught Gilbert's humor, and laughed the ghost of his odd, reluctant laugh. "It's safest," he said; "it seems to be the only way to keep from coming to blows. Besides, it's superfluous on your part."

"Oh, I can't allow that," retorted Gilbert, "if I may say so without offense," he added, with mock anxiety.

"Gilbert," Easton began, after a little silence, "I suppose you must know what I would like to tell you?"

Gilbert, who had resumed his former place, glanced at his friend from the corner of his eye. "Yes, I think I can guess it."

"Well?"

"Why, my dear fellow, it's so very completely and rightly your own affair, that I can have nothing to say if you tell it. A man doesn't ask his friend for advice in such matters; he asks him for sympathy, for congratulation."

Easton gave a little sigh. "And that you're not prepared to offer," he said, with a miserable smile.

"Why, Easton!" exclaimed the other. "Isn't this rather a new line for you? Since when have you wanted *my* approval of any course you were to take? You used to make up your mind to a thing and do it, and *then* ask my approval."

"Approval isn't the question, quite," said Easton, nettled. "There's nothing to approve or to disapprove."

"I admit the word's clumsy," answered Gilbert, shortly.

Easton said nothing for a little while, and then he spoke soberly: "I don't want to force any confidence on you, Gilbert; and after what's passed I know it's natural for you to shrink from having anything to do with this affair of mine; it is completely my own, as you say. But I can't have things remain as they are in your mind in regard to—to Mrs. Farrell. You know that I'm in love with her; it's no secret; I wouldn't mind shouting it from the housetop, even if she had refused me a hundred times. But she hasn't. I have told her that I love

her; and she hasn't forbidden me; I don't know whether she has warranted me in hoping, or not; but she has imposed conditions on my speaking to her again, and that is something."

He glanced appealingly at Gilbert, who sat up and confronted him. "Easton," he said, with an indefinable air of uncandor, "we never spoke of Mrs. Farrell together but once, and then I said things which, if I could have supposed you were going to take her so seriously, I wouldn't have said. You know that."

"Yes, I know that, Gilbert," answered Easton, affectionately.

"Well; and now what do you want me to say? You must let me hold my tongue. It's the only way. I will respect you in whatever you do. As for the lady who may some day forbid you to bring me to dinner any more, the least said is the soonest mended."

"Yes; but you are very unjust to her." The words seemed to have escaped from Easton, who looked a trifle alarmed after speaking them.

"Unjust? Unjust! You're right; I revise my opinion; I think I didn't do her justice."

"What do you mean?" demanded Easton.

Gilbert gave a short laugh.

"You must know, Gilbert," said Easton, breathing quickly, "that this is very insulting to me."

"I beg your pardon. I don't mean to insult you, Heaven knows. But I do ask your leave to be silent."

"And I ask you to hear me patiently. Will you?"

"I will, indeed."

Easton opened his lips as if to speak, but he did not speak at once; he did not seem to find the words or the thoughts so ready as he expected.

'I never blamed you," he began, finally, "for any judgment you formed of her character, and I certainly invited the expression of it. I know that what she says and does sometimes can be harshly interpreted," and again he hesitated, "but I'm sure anyone who will make a generous interpretation—"

"I'll try," interrupted Gilbert; "I'll adopt any generous interpretation you offer of her experiment upon the strength of our regard. How does she explain it herself?"

"She explains it—" began Easton, "she made it a condition of my speaking to her again—she told me to say—"

He choked with the words, and Gilbert was silent. "Oh, my dear, dear old Easton," he broke out at last, "do let it all go! What's Mrs. Farrell to me or I to her? If you are in love with her, why, marry her and be done with it. I could imagine any woman's turning constant by virtue of your loving her, and I've no doubt she'll be the best wife in the world for you. I take back all I said of her."

"It isn't that; it's what you haven't said. It's what you think," said Easton, hotly.

"Oh, good Lord! And what is it I think?"

"You exonerate me from all blame in the cause of our disagreement."

"Yes, I *do!*"

"But if you exonerate me at her expense, you

disgrace and dishonor me; you offer me a reconciliation that no man can accept."

Gilbert did not answer, and seemed to have made up his mind not to answer. Easton went on, "She feels so deeply the trouble between us that she charged me to make friends with you at any cost; not to spare her in the least—to—"

Easton hesitated, and Gilbert said, "Well?" but the other did not go on. Then Gilbert said: "I have no comment to make on all this. What do you wish me to do?"

"To do? What do I wish? Do you think you don't owe it to her to say—"

Gilbert laughed aloud. "That she acted from the highest motives throughout? No, I certainly don't think that," he said, and then he began to grow pale, while Easton reddened angrily. "By Heaven!" Gilbert broke out, "it seems that I have misunderstood this case. I supposed that between you you had somehow used me ill, but it appears that I have done an injury to a meek and long-suffering angel. I supposed that she had cunningly turned the chance you gave her against me, and meant, if she couldn't make me feel her power one way, to make me feel it another. I supposed she intended to break us apart, and to be certain of *you* at any cost. But I'll interpret her *generously*, since you wish me to. I'll say that I acquit her of any particular malevolence. I'll say that she merely wanted to over-punish me, like a woman, for some offense in my words or manner; or I'll say that she acted from an empty and reckless caprice; that it was curiosity drove

her to follow up the clew which you had given her —for motives of your own; I won't judge them. I'll say that I believe she was frightened when she saw the mischief she had done, and would have undone it if she could; though I'm not so sure of that, either! You think she might be induced to forgive me, do you? Will you undertake to tell her what I say, and make my peace with her?" he asked offensively, his nostrils dilating. "I've had enough of this!" and he rose.

Easton had sat silent under this torrent of bitterness. He now sprang to his feet.

"Stop!" he shouted. "You have got to take back every word—"

"Don't be a fool, Easton!"

Easton ground his teeth. "You take a base advantage of what has passed between us; you rely on my forbearance to—"

"Oh! Passed between us!" sneered Gilbert. "Your forbearance! What do you think of the forbearance of a man who could lend himself to an infamous scoundrel's revenge; who could consent to rise at his friend's expense, and then live to boast of it to a woman?"

Easton choked. "What do you think," he cried with equal outrage, "of a man who could urge me to do what I did, and always refuse to do or be anything that could cancel my regret, holding my consent in reproach over me through years of fraud and hypocrisy, to fling it in my face at last?"

Their friendship, honored and dear so long, was in the dust between them, and they trampled it

under foot with the infernal hate that may have always lurked, a possible atrocity, in their hearts, silenced, darkened, put to shame by the perpetual kindness of their daily lives.

It remained for Gilbert, with all the insult he could wreak in the demand, to ask, "Is that Mrs. Farrell's interpretation of my motives?" and then they were in the mood to kill, if they had been armed. But so much of the personal sanctity in which they had held each other remained instinctive with them that they could not inflict the final shame of blows.

They stood face to face in silence, and then Gilbert turned and walked slowly down toward the opening of the glen; Easton made a few mechanical paces after him. When Gilbert reached the border of the meadow he stopped and, with whatever motive, went swiftly back to the scene of their quarrel. He came in sight of the spot, but Easton was not to be seen there; he quickened his going almost to a run; and then he saw Easton lying at the brink of the pool. There was a slight cut along his temple, from which the blood ran curling into the clear basin, where it hung distinct, like a spire of smoke in crystal air.

Chapter X

GILBERT knelt at the side of the man who was his friend again, and caught up his head and dashed his face from the pool, while a groan broke from his own lips—the anguish of the sex which our race forbids to weep. He stanched the blood with his handkerchief, and then felt in Easton's pocket for another to bind over the wound; and as he folded it in his hands it emitted a fragrance that pierced him with a certain puzzling suggestion, and added to his sorrow a keener sting of remorseful shame.

Easton unclosed his eyes at last, and looked up at him. "Did you strike me, Gilbert?" he asked.

"No, no—oh no! God knows I didn't! How could I strike you, my dear old boy?"

"I thought you did; you would have done well to kill me. I had outraged you to the death."

"Oh, Easton, I came here wanting to be friends with you, to make it all right again. And now—"

"I know that. It *is* all right. Whose blood is this? Were you hurt? Oh—mine! Yes, I must have fainted, and cut myself in falling. I've felt queer all day. This heat has been too much for me. How long ago was it?"

"How long? I don't know. Just now."

"I thought it was longer. It seems a great while ago."

He closed his eyes wearily, and Gilbert stood looking ruefully down upon him. After a little while he rose giddily to his feet. "Will you help me home, Gilbert?" he asked, as he leaned tremulously against a rock.

"You could never walk to the hotel, Easton," said Gilbert. Easton sat down again, and Gilbert stared at him in perplexed silence. "By heavens!" he broke out, "I don't know what to do, exactly. If you were over at the farm we could get that carryall and drive you to the hotel; but your room would be horribly close and hot after you got there."

"I can't go to the farmhouse," said Easton, with languid impatience, "and run the chances of making a scene; I couldn't stand *that*, you know."

"No; you couldn't stand that," assented Gilbert, gloomily. "But it would be much the same thing at the hotel, with more women to assist. Faint?" he asked, looking anxiously at Easton's face.

"A little. You'd better wet my head," answered Easton, taking off the handkerchief that bound up his face. Gilbert did so, and then left the dripping handkerchief on Easton's head. "Thanks. That's good. We'll stay here awhile. It's the best place, after all. It's cool as any," he said, looking refreshed.

Gilbert watched his face anxiously; but he was at his wits' end, and they both sat silent. He looked at his watch; it was two o'clock. He grimly waited half an hour, exchanging a word with Eas-

ton now and then, and freshening the handkerchief at the pool from time to time. The opening of the glen darkened, and the steady glare on the meadow beyond ceased. Gilbert walked down to the edge of the pasture and looked out. A heavy cloud hid the sun. "Look here, Easton, this won't do," he said when he came back. "It's going to rain, and you've got to get under shelter, somehow. We must run the gantlet to the back of the farmhouse, and try to find some conveyance to the hotel. Do you think you could manage to walk with my help across the meadow? The sun's behind a cloud, now, and I don't think it would hurt you."

"Oh yes," said Easton, "I can walk very well. Just give me your arm, a little way."

They set out and toiled slowly up the long meadow slope, slanting their course in the direction of the orchard behind the house. Easton hung more heavily on his friend's arm as they drew nearer. "Do you suppose we've been seen?" he panted, as they stepped through a gap in the orchard wall.

"No; there isn't a woman on watch; not a solitary soul. They're everyone asleep—confound 'em," said Gilbert, in the fervent irrelevancy of his gratitude. "Now you sit here, Easton, and I'll run up to the kitchen door and tell one of the boys to get out his team, and we'll have you out of harm's way in half a minute."

Easton sank upon a stone, and Gilbert ran toward the house under cover of the orchard trees. He was not out of sight when Easton heard women's voices behind a cluster of blackberry brambles

near the wall on the left; then, without being able to stir, he heard the sweep of dresses over the grass toward him; he knew that in the next instant he was to be discovered; he rose with a desperate effort and confronted Mrs. Farrell and the two young girls, Miss Alden and Miss Jewett, who were lamenting the heat and wondering how soon it would rain.

He felt rather than heard them stop, and he made some weak paces toward them, essaying a ghastly smile as he lifted his eyes to Mrs. Farrell's face. Then he saw her blanch at his pallor, and saw her see the cut on his temple. "I've had a fall, and a little scratch. It's nothing. Don't mind it. Gilbert—"

A killing chagrin, such as only a man can feel who finds himself unmanned in the presence of her he loves, was his last sensation as he sank in the grass before her. The young girls fled backward, but she rushed toward him with a wild cry, "Oh, he's dead!" and in another moment the people came running out of the house and thronged round them with question, and injurious good will, and offers to have him taken to their rooms. Gilbert came with them and flung up his fists in despair. Mrs. Farrell had Easton's head upon her knee, and was sprinkling his face from one of many proffered flagons of cologne. "No, he shall not go to your room," she vehemently retorted upon the last hospitable zealot; "he shall go to mine; he is *mine!*" she said. "Here, Rachel, Ben, Mrs. Woodward—will you help me?"

The others fell back at her brave confession, and they all began to like her. They meekly suffered themselves to be dispersed, and they cowered together on the piazza while a messenger ran for the doctor. Then, while the ladies waited his report, they talked together in low tones, though they were separated from Mrs. Farrell's room by the whole depth of the house. Not a voice dissented from the praises of the heroine of a love episode whose dramatic interest reflected luster upon them all. The ladies were even more enthusiastic than the men, and several rebuked their husbands, who had formerly been too forward in doing justice to Mrs. Farrell, for coldness in responding now to their own pleasure in her.

"George, how *can* you smoke?" asked the youngest of the married ladies, and reproachfully drew her husband's newspaper away from him and sent him into the orchard with his cigar. Another made her husband take the children away for a walk, in order that the ladies might not be distracted by their play while attending the verdict of the physician. The common belief was that Easton would die, and in the meantime they excited themselves over the question as to how, when, and where he had fallen. The husband with the cigar was suffered to approach and say that he had known an old fellow once who had been out in the heat a good deal, and had gone into the woods to cool off, and had come home in the evening with a cut in his head and a story that he had been attacked and knocked down.

"Yes," said one of the ladies, who had a logical mind, "but Mr. Easton doesn't pretend to have been knocked down, and—and he isn't an old fellow."

"I was going to say," retorted the smoker, taking a good long whiff, with half-closed eyes, insensible to the frantically gesticulated protest of his wife, "that this old fellow was supposed not to have been attacked at all; he had got giddy with the heat and tumbled over and barked his skull against a tree, and then fancied he'd been knocked down; they often do."

The theory seemed to have reason in it, but the language in which it was clothed made it too repulsive for acceptance, and there was open resentment of it by the tribunal before which it was offered. At this moment the doctor was seen slanting down the grass toward the gate from the side door; the ladies called after him and captured him.

"The wound is a very slight matter," said the doctor; "but Mr. Easton had something like a sunstroke this summer in New York, and is very sensitive to the heat."

"Yes, yes," said the spokeswoman, eager for all, "but what happened to him? How did he get hurt?"

"His friend thinks he was overcome by the heat and struck his face against a point of rock in falling, over there in the valley by the sugar orchard."

"There!" said the young wife, who at heart had felt keenly injured by the indifference to her hus-

band's theory, "it's just as George said. Oh, *George!*" She took him by the arm, joying in his wisdom, and looked fondly into his face, while he smoked imperturbably.

"Yes, but will he get well?" tremulously demanded the spokeswoman of the group, pursuing the doctor on his way to the gate.

"Oh, I think so," said the doctor; "he's got the temperature in his favor now"; for though the threatened storm had passed without rain, it had left the air much cooler.

The doctor mounted into his buggy and chirruped to his horse and drove off. He came again in the evening, and said they had better not move Easton to the hotel that night, left his prescriptions, and went away.

Mrs. Woodward and Rachel began to talk together about where they should put Easton.

"Put him!" cried Mrs. Farrell, emerging upon them where they stood in a dimly lighted group, with Gilbert and Mrs. Gilbert just outside the door. She had an armful of draperies of which she had been dismantling her closet. "He's not to be put *any*where. I'm going to stay with Rachel, and he's to stay where he is till he gets perfectly well. It would kill him to move him!" The women were impressed, and looked to see conviction in Gilbert's face.

"It would kill him to keep him where he is, Mrs. Farrell," said Gilbert, dryly. "A man can't stand too much kindness in his sensitive state. You must have some regard for his helplessness. He

would never let you turn out of your room for him in the world; and if you try to make him it will simply worry him to death. It 'll be gall and wormwood to him, anyway, to think of the trouble he's given. You must have a little mercy on him."

Gilbert had to make a long fight in behalf of his friend; he ended by painting Easton's terrors of a scene when they were coming toward the farmhouse from the glen.

Opinion began to veer round to his side. "Well, well," cried Mrs. Farrell, passionately, "take him away from me—take him where you will! You let me do nothing for him; you think him nothing to me!"

"If he could stay where he is for the night," said Mrs. Woodward, "he could have Mrs. Burroughs's room to-morrow; she's going to the seaside and won't want it any more."

This matter-of-fact proposal seemed so reasonable that it united the faltering opposition, and Mrs. Farrell had to give way. In their hearts, no doubt, all the women sighed over the situation's loss of ideality. At parting, Mrs. Gilbert took Mrs. Farrell's hand and went so far as to kiss her. "I don't think you need be anxious," the older woman said. "The doctor says he needs nothing but care and quiet, and he'll be well again in a few days. Even now I can't help congratulating you. I didn't know matters had gone so far—so soon. My dear," she added, after a little hesitation, "I'm afraid I haven't quite done you justice. I thought —excuse my saying it now—I thought perhaps you

were amusing yourself. I beg your pardon in all humbleness."

"Oh don't, *don't*, Mrs. Gilbert!" cried Mrs. Farrell, and cast her arms about her neck, and sobbed there. She went to Rachel's room, and changed her dress for a charming gown in which she could just lie down and jump up in an instant. She bound her hair in a simple knot, and when she came back to her own room with her lamp held high and shaded with one hand, she looked like a stylish Florence Nightingale with a dash of Lady Macbeth.

Gilbert was sitting there in the dark, beside a table on which the light revealed a curious store of medicines and restoratives, the contribution of all the boarders: five or six flagons of cologne and one of bay rum; a case bottle of brandy; a bottle of Bourbon whisky; a pint of Bass's pale ale; the medicines left by the doctor; some phials of homœopathic pellets from Mrs. Stevenson, who used the high-potency medicines; a tiny bottle of liquid nux from Mrs. Gilbert, who preferred the appreciable doses, and despised all who did not; a lemon; three oranges; a box of guava jelly—from one of the young girls. Mrs. Farrell's tragic gaze met Gilbert's lowering eyes and wandered with them to this array; they both smiled, but she was the first to frown. She beckoned him from the room, and "Here is your lamp," she said. "Don't turn it down or it will smoke, but set it where it won't shine in his eyes. I'm going to be there in that room." She pointed down the passageway toward Rachel's door. "If he needs the least thing you're

to call me." Her severity would have admonished any levity that lingered in Gilbert's heavy heart, as she put the lamp in his hand.

"Let me light you back to your room," he said, with moody humility.

"No, I can find the way perfectly well in the dark," she answered. "Or—yes, you had better come, so as to make sure of the right door in case you need me. You think I tried to make you quarrel!" she said in a swift undertone, as they passed down the hall; "but I never meant it, and you *know* that, whatever you think. Oh, I have been punished, punished! But I'm glad you held out against me about the room," she added. "He would have been as true to you; and if you had let me do anything to make him seem silly, I should have hated you!"

He saw with a man's helplessness the tremor of her lips, and then she had opened and closed the door, and he stood blankly staring at it.

In the morning Easton was well enough to sit up in an easy-chair, and was fretfully eager to return to his hotel. It was clear that he was intensely vexed at having caused the sensation of the day before, and that the fear of giving further trouble galled him with the keenest shame. They were only too glad to release him from the fond imprisonment to which Mrs. Farrell would have sentenced him, on condition that he would consent to occupy the room vacated by Mrs. Burroughs for a few days, and be cared for better than he could be at the hotel, until he was quite well again.

But in a few days he was not quite so well. He fell from his dull languor into a low fever, and from feebly lounging about his room and drowsing in an easy-chair it came to his not rising one morning at all.

Thus his hold upon the happiness so fiercely pursued, and now within his grasp, relaxed, and a vast vagueness encompassed him, in which he strove with one colossal task: to make Gilbert see a certain matter as he saw it, which was not at all the matter of their quarrel, but some strange abstraction, he never could make out what, though their agreement upon it was a vital necessity. He was never delirious, but he was never sure of anything; a veil was drawn between his soul and all experience; he could not tell, when he had been asleep, that he had slept; his waking was a dream; the world moved round him in elusive shadow.

He was what one of the ladies called comfortably sick. It was not thought from the first that he was in danger, and as it turned out he was not. But if he had lain for a month at the point of death, he could not have been more precious to that houseful of women, who enjoyed every instant of the poetic situation; maid and matron, those tender hearts were alike glad of the occasion to renew in this fortunate reality their faith in romance, and they turned fondly to Mrs. Farrell for a fulfillment of their ideal of devotion. It looked on the face of things rather like expecting devotion from a Pompeian fresco, so little did her signal beauty seem related to the exigency, so far should sickness and

sorrow have been from her world. But here Mrs. Farrell most disappointed those who most feared her picturesque inadequacy. She threw herself into her part with inspiration; rising far above the merely capable woman, she made her care of Easton a work of genius, and not only divined his wants and ministered to his comfort with a success that surprised all experience, but dealt so cunningly with his moods that he was at last flattered into submission if not resignation. In the beginning he was indeed a most refractory object of devotion; he chafed so bitterly against his helpless lapse into the fever, he was in such a continual revolt against his hospitable detention at the farmhouse, and was so weighed down, through all the hazy distance in which his life ebbed from actual events, with the shame of being a burden, that no magic less than hers could have consoled him. But she overcame his scruples and reconciled him to fate, so that it did not seem an unfair advantage to inflict the kindness against which he could not struggle; and she had her way with him, even to excess. Since she was not allowed to give up her room to him, she devoted herself in the moments of her leisure to the decoration of his chamber. She upholstered it almost anew with contributions from the ladies of scraps of chintz, mosquito-netting, and dotted muslin; she shut out the garish light with soft curtains; she put on the plain mirror and toilet table what Gilbert called a French cap and overskirt, and she furbelowed the mantelpiece. She took Mrs. Woodward's ivies and trained them up the corners,

and she had a great vase on the table, often renewed with autumnal wild flowers, ferns, and the firstlings of the reddening sumac leaves. As a final offering she brought in her spinning-wheel—the mania was then just beginning—and set it by the hearth. It must be owned that when all was done the place had a certain spectacularity; the furniture and ornaments wore somehow the air of properties; on the window seats, which she had contrived for greater coziness of effect, it was not quite safe to sit down. But her friends—and all the ladies were her friends now—easily forgave this to her real efficiency and her unsparing self-sacrifice; the two young girls worshiped the carpets she trod upon, and the whole sympathetic household sighed in despair at the perfection with which she, as one may say, costumed the part. She had ordinarily indulged a taste for those strong hues that went best with her Southern beauty, but now her robes were of the softest color and texture; she moved in slippers that made no sound; in emblem of devotion to the sick-room she denied herself every ornament; at first she even left off her Etruscan ear-rings, and kept only a limp scarf of dark red silk, tied at her throat in a sentiment of passionate neglect. In behalf of Easton's peaceful dreams she banished the Japanese fans, with their nightmare figures, and as she sat fanning him with a quaint, old-fashioned fan of white feathers, which she had skillfully mounted on a long handle, her partisans declared, some that she looked like an Eastern queen, other some, like an Egyptian slave. They remembered

her afterward in this effect, and also how she used to look as she stood at dusk lighting the little tapers which she had found at a queer country store in an out-of-the-way village of the neighborhood, and setting them afloat in a vase of oil, to illumine the chamber during the night. She realized the character as thoroughly in other respects; she met the friendliness all round her with gentle appreciation, availed herself of it little or nothing, and for the most part quietly withdrew from it. Her defiant airs were all laid aside; her prevailing mood was serious; she often spoke earnestly of matters which certainly had not commanded her open reverence before; there was a great change in her in every way, and some, who had always longed to like her, liked her now with thankful hearts for the opportunity. Among these Mrs. Gilbert made her advances like one who has an atonement to offer; Mrs. Farrell frankly accepted the tacit regret, and visited a good deal in her room.

But as the sick man's disorder slowly ran its course, and the days took him further and further from any joy in her, Mrs. Farrell seemed to lose her hold of the situation, and another change came over her, in which she fell from her high activities into a kind of dull and listless patience, and dragged out the time, uncheered by the inspiration that had hitherto upheld her. She seemed not to know what to do. The spring was gone, the impulse exhausted, in that strange nature, which knew itself perhaps as little as others knew it. Those were the days when she surrendered her authority to Rachel,

and served under her about Easton, who had also fallen largely to the care of Gilbert and Ben Woodward. Few young ladies would not willingly assume the task of nursing a young man through a low fever in a romance, but the reality is different. If it had been something short and sharp, a matter of a week's supreme self-devotion, it would doubtless have been otherwise with her; she was capable of great things, but a long trial of her endurance must finally lose its meaning. She had times of melancholy in which she sat behind her closed doors for hours, or when she went lonely walks through the woods or fields. She withdrew herself more and more from the society that sought her, and got a habit of consorting with poor old Nehemiah as he dug his potatoes or gathered his beans, and seemed to find him a relief and shelter. Heaven knows what they talked of. Doubtless, as she followed him from one potato hill to another, and listened to his discourse, he admired her taste for serious conversation, and was obscurely touched that such resplendent beauty should be so meekly contented with his company. She no longer teased Ben Woodward, whose open secret of a passion for her she used to recognize so freely; she was the boy's very humble servant in manner; and to Rachel's efficiency and constancy she was the stricken thrall. It was touching to see how willingly subservient she was to the girl, and how glad she was to be of any use that Rachel could think of. One night, after they had sat a long time silent by the taper's glimmer while Easton slept, she suddenly caught

Rachel by the arm and whispered, "Why don't you say it? How can you keep thinking it and thinking it, and never say it? For pity's sake, speak this once, and tell me that you know I did it all, and that you despise me!"

"I don't judge you," said Rachel; "and I have no right to despise anyone. You know, yourself, whether you are to blame for anything."

"Do you think I acted heartlessly that day when I made fun of him—there in the schoolhouse?"

"I *did* think so, then."

"Do you now? Do you believe I'm sorry?"

"How can I tell? You seemed unfeeling then, but I don't believe you were; and you seem sorry now—"

"And you don't believe I am! Oh me, I wonder if I am! Rachel, you do believe I know how to feel, don't you?"

"How can you ask such a thing as that?" returned the girl in a startled accent.

"I wonder if I do! It seems to me that I know how to feel, but that I never feel. It seems to me that I am always acting out the thing I ought to be or want to be, and never being it. Don't trust me, Rachel—not even now; I think that I'm very remorseful and sorry, but who knows if I am? I keep asking myself what I should do if he were to die—what would become of me. I try to scare myself about it; but my soul seems to be in a perfect torpor; I can't stir it. Rachel, Rachel! I *did* try to make him in love with me—all I could. There was such a deadly charm in it—his perfect faith in

me, whatever I said or did. But it frightened me at last, too; and I didn't know what to do; and that day when I behaved so about him, I was frantic; if I hadn't made fun of him, the thought of what I had done would have killed me. But I honored him all the time. Oh, he was my true, true lover; and when I thought how recklessly I had gone on, it almost drove me wild. Rachel, do you know what I did?" She poured out the whole story, and then she said, "But now I seem not to be able to care any more. It's all like a dream: it's some one running and running after me, and I am laughing and beckoning him on, and all of a sudden there he lies without help or motion; it can't give him any pleasure to see me, now; I can't do anything for him that some one else can't do better, or that he won't be as glad of from another. It's as if he were in prison, and I sat at the door outside, waiting in this horrible lethargy. When he comes out, what will he say to me? I think that I should die if he upbraided me; but if he didn't I should go mad. No, no! That's what some other woman would do. Rachel, isn't it awful to bring all these things home to yourself, and yet not suffer from them? Oh, but I care—I care because I can't care. My heart lies like a stone in my breast, and I'm furious because I can't break it, or hurt it. Rachel, if you give way before me I don't know where I shall end. You must never yield to me, no matter what mood I'm in, or else I shall lose the one real friend I have in the world—the only one I can be myself to, if there is really anything of me."

As she ceased to speak, Gilbert came in to take his place for the night. He asked Rachel in a low voice what was next to be done, but he took no notice of Mrs. Farrell save to give her a slight nod.

No one else treated her with coldness now; but in his manner toward her there still lingered a trace of resentment. It had a tone of irony, to which she submitted meekly, like one resolved to bear a just penalty; and if there were times when he forgot to be severe and she forgot to be sad, then afterward he was the more satirical and she the more patient. It began to be said by some of the ladies that Mr. Gilbert had rather a capricious temper; but he had his defenders, who maintained that he was merely run down with worry and confinement over his friend.

One day he came into Mrs. Gilbert's room, and found Mrs. Farrell with her. He offered to go away if he had burst upon a confidential interview, seeing that they fell silent at his coming, but Mrs. Farrell said that they had just finished their talk, and that now she was going.

Gilbert did not sit down after he had closed the door upon her, but took two or three lounging turns about the room. "It's very pleasant to see you and Mrs. Farrell such friends, Susan," he said, at last. "It's really millennial. But which is the wolf and which is the lamb?"

He laughed his short laugh, and Mrs. Gilbert answered, nervously, "You know very well I told you, the first time we talked of her, that I liked her."

"You said she fascinated you. The spell seems

to have deepened. You used to find some little imperfections in her."

"Well, and who pretends that I don't see them now?"

"Oh, not I. But I'm affected to see you so lenient to them of late. Did you know that she was a person of strong religious convictions?"

"What *do* you mean, William?"

"Nothing. She has found out that Easton and I are in a sort of suspense about such matters, and she says it is terrible. She can only account for our being able to endure it by supposing that men are different, more self-centered, not so dependent as women. She considers the Woodwards a high example of the efficacy of a religious training in the formation of character. She says she is not like Rachel; that she has an undisciplined nature, and was too irregularly trained, first in her father's belief and then in a convent. What was her father's belief? I suppose some sort of marine Methodism of the speaking-trumpet pitch. She wants my advice as to a course of reading in the modern philosophy; she thinks every Christian ought to know how his faith is being assailed."

Gilbert stopped in his walk and looked gravely at his sister-in-law, who gave a troubled sigh.

"What right have you to suppose she isn't perfectly in earnest now, William?"

"None; I think she thinks she is."

"She has shown so much more character, so much more heart, than I ever supposed she had, in this affair, that I'm glad to believe we were mis-

taken about her in several essential ways. The fact is, I always did have a sort of sneaking fondness for her, and now I'm determined to indulge it; so you needn't come to laugh about her in *my* sleeve, William. I'm an ardent Farrellite, and have been ever since I found out that she was in love with your friend. Don't you think she's very devoted to him?"

"Oh, I dare say. He's not in a state for devotion to tell upon, exactly."

Mrs. Gilbert looked baffled. Presently she asked, "Are she and Rachel Woodward as good friends as ever?"

"How do I know?" returned Gilbert, resuming his walk. "*That's* a curious girl, Susan. One meets enough good women in the world; I've always been able to believe in them," he said, stopping at Mrs. Gilbert's side to take her hand and kiss it; "in fact, the worst women seem pretty good, if one will only compare them with oneself; but I don't think I've understood, before, just the sort of feminine goodness that the unbroken tradition of your New England religiousness produces. Puritanism has fairly died out of the belief—I don't care what people profess to believe—but in such a girl as Rachel Woodward, all that was good in it seems to survive in the life. She's more like Easton than any other human being I know; they're both unerringly sincere; they're both faithful through thick and thin to what they think is right; only you can't help feeling that there's something Quixotic in Easton's noblest moods, and that he has an

arrogant scorn of meaner morals than his own. But her purity doesn't seem to judge anything but itself, and her goodness and veracity always seem to refer themselves to something outside of her. You can see before she speaks how she is considering her phrase, and choosing just the words that shall give her mind with scriptural scruple against superfluity; if you know the facts, you know what she will say, for she's almost divinely without variableness or shadow of turning where the truth is concerned. It's awful; it makes me hang my head for shame, to watch the working of that vestal soul of hers. And with all this inflexibility—you might call it angularity—of rectitude, she has a singular charm, a distinctly feminine charm."

"Oh, indeed! And what is her charm?"

"Poh, Susan!" said Gilbert, looking askance at her. "Don't make me think you can be guilty of bad taste."

"Oh, well; I won't, I won't, my dear boy! I didn't mean to," cried Mrs. Gilbert. "It *was* rather foolish in me to interrupt you."

"I can't call it an interruption, exactly; I had got to the end of my say."

He went off to Easton's room, where he found Rachel Woodward putting things in order for the evening, and he smiled to see with what conscientious regard she preserved Mrs. Farrell's arrangements, as matters having a sacred claim to which no reforms of her own could have pretended, and yet managed somehow to imbue all that picturesqueness with a quality of homelike comfort.

He nodded to her, and said he was going out for a short walk.

On the road he overtook Mrs. Farrell, who was moving rather sadly along by herself. Her face brightened as she turned and saw him, but she waited for him to speak.

"Where are your inseparable comrades?" he asked.

"Oh!" said she. "Jenny Alden isn't very well, this afternoon, and Miss Jewett has gone over with Mrs. Stevenson to Quopsaug."

"Quop— *what?*" asked Gilbert, stopping short.

"Quopsaug," repeated Mrs. Farrell, simply. "Did you never hear of it?"

"No, I never heard of Quopsaug. Is it—vegetable or mineral?"

"It's vegetable, I believe. At least it vegetates. It's a place—a huddle of unpainted wooden houses in a little hollow at the foot of Scatticong, on the east side. It has a Folly and it has a Bazar. But I wonder Quopsaug hasn't come up long ago in our poverty-stricken conversation. I suppose everyone must have thought everybody else had talked you to death about it."

"No," said Gilbert. "What do people go to Quopsaug for?"

"To see the Folly—that's the storekeeper's mansion; and to buy things out of the Bazar—that's his store. And to wheedle the inhabitants generally out of their spinning-wheels; at least that's what Mrs. Stevenson's gone for to-day."

"And is Quopsaug a nickname?"

"No; it's one of those musical Indian names we're so fond of in New England. The people adopted it thirty or forty years ago, when they started a cotton mill—which failed—there. The place used to be called East Leander, but they re-christened it Quopsaug, after a chief who scalped the first settler, and then became a praying Indian, and lies over there in the Quopsaug graveyard, under a Latin epitaph. You ought to go to Quopsaug."

"I must," said Gilbert, absently; the talk dropped, and they walked on in silence till they came to a rise in the road overlooking a swampy meadow. In the midst of this stood a slim, consumptive young maple in a hectic of premature autumnal tints, and with that conscious air which the first colored trees have.

I suppose you would like a branch of that." said Gilbert, "for your vase."

"Why, yes," assented Mrs. Farrell. When he brought it to her, she had turned about and was facing homeward. "An olive branch?" she asked, with a tentative little burlesque.

"If you like," said Gilbert, with a laugh that was not gay. "It isn't quite the color; but it's olive branch enough for all the peace you probably mean, and it's sufficiently angry-looking for war when you happen to feel like making trouble again."

The leaves were mainly of a pallid yellow, but their keen points and edges were red as if dipped in blood. She flung the bough away and started forward, dashing the back of her hand passionately across her eyes.

It was as though he had struck her. He made haste to come up with her. "Mrs. Farrell," he faltered, dismayed at the words that had escaped him, "I've been atrociously rude."

"Oh, not unusually so!" she said, darting a look upon him from gleaming eyes, while her lips quivered. "You seem to feel authorized to give me pain whenever you like. You needn't do so much to make me know the difference between yourself and Mr. Easton."

Gilbert's face darkened. "Upon my word," he said, "I think the less you say about that the better."

"Why?" she retorted, trembling all over with excitement. "You force me every moment to remember his magnanimity and generosity; all your words and acts teach me how friendless I am without him. He never could believe so ill of a woman as you do; but if the case were changed, I don't think he would choose the part of my torturer. And you are his *friend!*" She broke, and the tears fell down her face.

Gilbert walked speechless beside her. "It's true," he said at last, "Easton is a better man than I; he's a manlier man, if you like—or if you mean that."

She did not speak, but she slightly slackened her fierce pace, and seemed to be waiting for him to speak again.

"But I didn't know that I had been giving you so much pain. I'm sorry—I'm ashamed—with all my heart. I ask your pardon."

"Yes, yes! I know how you say all that. Oh, I know the superior stand you take! I know how you say to yourself, 'It's my business to treat her handsomely for Easton's sake, whatever I think of her. Come, I'll do the right thing, at any rate!' You ask my pardon. Thanks, thanks; I give it in all meekness. Yes, let there be a truce between us. I can't choose but be glad to be let alone. Will you walk on and leave me now, Mr. Gilbert, or let me leave you?"

"No, I can't part from you so. Let it be peace, not a truce. I make no such reservations as you imagine. I beseech you to pardon my brutality and to forget my rudeness."

She halted, and impulsively stretched out her hand toward him, and then suddenly withdrew it before he could take it. "Wait," she said, seriously. "I can't be friends with you yet, till I know whether you really think me worthy. If you don't, you shall have no forgiveness of mine. You must be more than sorry that you hurt my feelings."

"I will be as much sorry, and about as many things, as you like."

"Oh, don't try to turn it into a joke! You know what I mean. Did Mr. Easton tell you what I told him to say about the trouble between you? Did he lay the whole blame upon me? Did he say that I did it willfully and recklessly, because your friendship piqued me, and because—because—though I never thought of that before!—I was jealous of it?"

Gilbert did not smile at the slight confusion of ideas, but answered, gravely, "Easton was not the

man to lay blame upon you—he would like it too well himself. Besides, I was unfair with him, and gave him no chance to speak in your defense."

"Oh, how could you be so cruel as that? He was so true to you! I should think you never could forgive yourself for that. You ought to have heard him praise you. He told me everything. Yes, you did act grandly. But he could have done as much for you, and more, or he never would have suffered your self-sacrifice."

"There is only one Easton in the world," said Gilbert, gloomily; and he went on to talk of Easton's character, his noble eccentricities, his beneficent life, and his heroic ideals. He spoke with a certain effect of self-compulsion very different from the light-hearted liking with which he had once before talked with her of Easton, but she listened reverently, and at the end she said with a sigh: "No, I see that I didn't know him. Why, I hadn't even imagined it! Why *should* he care for *me?*"

Gilbert did not undertake to answer the question, and she said, "But I am so glad you have told me so much about him. How proud I shall be to surprise him with it all!"

Gilbert made no sign of sharing her rapture, but she seemed not to heed him.

They were very near the house, now, and she turned on him an upward, sidelong look, as her lower stature obliged, and asked, "And you really think me worthy to be sorry?"

"Yes," said Gilbert, with a heavy breath.

"Then I'll forget your cruelty," she said; "but don't do it any more." She dropped him a little nod, and went into the house without him. He stood there watching the black doorway through which she had vanished, but it was as if he had followed her, so wholly had all sense fled after her out of his face. He stirred painfully from his posture, and cast his eye upward at Easton's room. The cold window met his glance with a gleam from which he shrank, with a sudden shock at the heart, as though he had caught Easton's eye, and he turned and walked away into the nightfall.

Chapter XI

EASTON began to show signs of decided convalescence. Day by day he became more susceptible of the kindnesses which his sympathizers yearned to lavish upon him, all the more ardently for being so long held aloof by the certainty that the best thing they could do was to let him alone; the ladies got out their recipes for sick-room delicacies again, and broths and broils were debated. One day he sat up in a chair to have his bed made, and then a great wave of rejoicing ran through the house. Mrs. Farrell created a wine jelly which, when it was turned out of the mold upon a plate, was as worshipfully admired as if it had been the successful casting in bronze of some great work of art.

Her spirits had begun to rise; that day she moved as if on air, and as he grew better and better she put off the moral and material tokens of her lingering bondage to fear. For some time she had suffered herself to wear those great hoops of Etruscan gold in her ears; now she replaced her penitential slippers and sober shoes with worldly boots; she blossomed again in the rich colors that became her; on the following Sunday she celebrated her release in a silk that insulted her past captivity, and sang

for joy as she swooped through the house in it. On Monday she bought out the small stock of worsteds at the West Pekin store, and sat matching them in her lap when Gilbert came out upon the piazza. He stopped to look at her, and she asked him if he had any taste in colors. "Men have, a great deal oftener than women will allow," she said. "At least they are quite apt to have inspirations in color."

"I don't believe I have," answered Gilbert, still looking at her radiance and not at the worsteds. "I lived long and happily without knowing some colors from others by name."

Mrs. Farrell laughed. "Oh, I didn't mean the names. Women are glibber than men with those. But you'd have been able to criticize the effect, wouldn't you? You'd have known that blue wouldn't do for a brunette, if you'd seen it on her?"

"I'm not so sure," said Gilbert.

"Why, look!" cried Mrs. Farrell, taking up a delicate shade of blue and holding it against one cheek, while she fixed her eyes upon his with businesslike preoccupation. "There! don't you see how we take the life out of each other? Don't you see that it perfectly kills me?"

"Well, I don't know. I should say that the worsted was getting the worst of it."

"Worsted and worsted; a pun or an opinion?" demanded Mrs. Farrell, still holding the color to her cheek, and her eyes on his.

"Oh, either; one's as good as the other."

"I don't believe you meant either. I'm sorry

you can't help me about matching these wools, and I've a great mind to make use of you in another way. But I don't suppose you would do it," she said, glancing up at him as she straightened the skeins of yarn by slipping them over her two hands.

"What do you wish to do?"

"Why, I wish to wind these skeins into little balls, and—"

"Me to hold them, as you're doing, whilst you wind? I don't mind that."

"Really? I think it's the silliest position in the world for a man; and I can't let you. No, no; you shall not."

"Yes, but I will. Come. I wish to show you that my manly dignity can rise superior to holding worsteds."

He took up a skein and stretched it on his hands; she loosened a thread and began to wind; both with gloomy brows. When she had half done, she flung down the ball, and burst into a laugh. "No, no; you can't face it out. You look silly in spite of that noble frown. How do you suppose you appear to those ladies down there under the trees, with your hands raised in that gesture of stage-supplication? You look as if you were imploring me for your life—or something; and here I am making all these cabalistic motions," she resumed her winding, "as if I were weaving a spell around you! Do let us stop it! And I'll get Miss Jewett to help me."

"No, go on," said Gilbert. "If you offer to stop, I shall clasp my hands!"

"Oh, oh!" shouted Mrs. Farrell. "Don't, for pity's sake! Was ever a poor sorceress so at her victim's mercy before? This skein is nearly done. Will you put down your hands, you cruel object of my unhallowed arts?"

"I will, if you'll let me put them up again, and help finish the other skeins. If you don't consent, I'll keep holding them so."

"Well, then I'll leave you in that interesting attitude."

"If you dare to rise, I'll follow you all about in it."

"Oh dear me! I really believe you would. There, take up another skein."

"No, you must put it on, yourself; I've just got my hands in the right places."

"But you said you'd put them down if I'd let you put them up again," lamented Mrs. Farrell.

"I've changed my mind. I said that before I perceived that I had you in my power. If you don't hurry, I'll exaggerate the attitude. Quick!"

She was laughing so that she could hardly arrange the yarn upon the framework so rigidly presented to her.

"Don't hold your thumbs like sticks," she besought him. "Have a little flexibility, if you have no pity. It's some satisfaction to think you *do* look foolish."

"I have the consolation of suspecting that you *feel* so. I'm quite willing to do the looking."

Mrs. Farrell said nothing, but swiftly wound the yarn upon the ball, and, "Don't hurry!" com-

manded Gilbert. "I'm not going to put my hands down till I like, anyway. So you may as well take your time."

"Oh, Mr. Gilbert," pleaded Mrs. Farrell. "How can you threaten me, when I'm so meekly letting you have your own way! I never should have supposed you were that kind of man."

"Neither should I," said Gilbert. "This is the first opportunity I've had to play the tyrant to one of your amiable sex, and I'm determined to abuse it."

"Oh, that's a likely story! With that conceited air of yours, when you are so good as to address a woman! Don't be a humbug, if you *are* a faithless despot."

"And don't you employ harsh language in addressing me, Mrs. Farrell, or I'll sit here all day with my hands outstretched to you."

"All day? Oh—happy thought! Wind very slowly and tire him out!"

"Do! I could stop here until I changed into a mere figure in a bas-relief—a profile and the back of a lifted hand; and you a classic shape intent upon the flying thread—"

"That's not fair, Mr. Gilbert. To make remarks upon me when you know I can't help myself."

"Don't you like to have remarks made upon you?"

"Not when I can't help myself."

"Why not? I haven't forbidden you to answer back."

"But you would, if my answers didn't suit you.

How is it, if you don't know anything about colors, that you dress in such very tolerable taste?"

"Do I? Mrs. Farrell, don't take advantage of my helplessness to flatter me! I suppose it's my tailor's taste—which I always go against. And then, it's New York."

"Yes, New York *is* well dressed," sighed Mrs. Farrell. "Oh dear me! The *style* of some New York girls that I've seen! I suppose men can't feel it as *we* do."

"Don't be so sure of that. We can't give any but the elementary names of things that a woman has on, but I don't believe the subtlest effect of a dress is ever lost upon men; and I believe the soul of any man of imagination is as much taken with style in dressing as with beauty. Americans all adore it—perhaps because it's so characteristic of American women that they seem almost to have invented it. It's a curious thing—something different from beauty, something different from grace, something more charming than either, and as various as both. I should say it was the expression of personal character, and that American women have more style than any other women because they have more freedom, and utter themselves in dry-goods more fearlessly."

Mrs. Farrell stopped winding the yarn a moment, and instinctively cast down her eyes over her draperies. He smiled.

"For shame!" she cried, indignantly, while her eyes dimmed with mortification at her self-betrayal. But she boldly grappled with the situation. "Did

you think I was thinking you thought *me* stylish? I know I am so; I had no need to think that. I was thinking that if ever you left the law and followed the true bent of your genius, New York ladies needn't go to Worth for their dresses."

"Isn't that an unnecessarily elaborate bit of insult, considering that I hadn't said a word to provoke it?"

"You smiled."

"Why, you've been laughing all the time."

"But I wasn't laughing at you."

"Whom were you laughing at?"

"I was laughing at myself."

"Well, I merely smiled at you."

But Mrs. Farrell was plainly hurt past jesting for the present. She wound furiously at the worsted, and they both kept silence.

At last Gilbert asked, "What is all this yarn for?"

"To knit a smoking-cap for Mr. Easton," she said, coldly, and then neither spoke again. Presently she caught a half-finished skein from his hand, tossed the balls and skeins together in her lap, and, gathering them up, swept indoors, leaving him planted where he had sat confronting her.

In spite of the careless gayety of his banter, Gilbert had worn a look that was neither easy nor joyous. He did not seem much irritated by her excessive retaliation, but presently rose and walked listlessly up to the village to get his letters, and when he came back he went to his sister-in-law's room with a letter which he showed her.

"Shall you go?" she asked, eagerly.

"I don't know. I don't know why I'm not on fire to go, but I don't happen to be so. There's a day or two for thinking it over. If it were not for Easton—"

"He's a long while getting well," said Mrs. Gilbert with an impatient sigh; "I don't see why he's so slow about it."

"Well, Susan," languidly reasoned Gilbert, "you've been about fifteen years yourself getting well, and you haven't quite finished yet. You can't consistently complain of a few weeks, more or less, in Easton. I dare say he would be well at once, if he could; but it isn't a matter that he can hurry, exactly."

"No," said Mrs. Gilbert. "But aren't you losing a great deal of time here, William? You came for two weeks, and you've stayed nearly six. Don't you think Easton could get on without you, now?"

"Why, considering that Easton came here because he thought I'd like to have him, when I was merely a little under the weather, I don't think it would be quite the thing for me to go off now, and leave him before he's fairly on his legs."

"That's true," sighed Mrs. Gilbert. "And I'm glad to have you so faithful to your friend, William. I'm sure you never could forgive yourself if you were recreant to him in the slightest thing. Your friendship has sacred claims upon you both. I have sometimes thought it was a little too romantic, but it's a great thing to have the highest

standard in such matters, and you could never let your fidelity be less than Easton's."

Gilbert looked at her and pulled his mustache uneasily, but Mrs. Gilbert kept her eyes upon the sewing she had in hand. "*You* and Mrs. Farrell seem to be friends at present. I have heard of your holding worsted for her to wind, just now. The ladies who saw you at a little distance thought it a very picturesque group, and seemed grateful for the topic you had given them. They talked about it a good deal. I suppose it *was* picturesque—at least her part of it. I don't think manly grace is at its best under such circumstances, though I dare say you weren't posing for spectators."

"I had no quarrel with Mrs. Farrell," said Gilbert, choosing to ignore the other points.

"No? I thought there seemed to be a little coldness at one time."

"Perhaps the shyness of comparative strangers, Mrs. Gilbert."

"William," said Mrs. Gilbert, "I wish you would talk seriously with me a moment."

"Then you must start a serious subject. You can't expect me to be very earnest about genteel comedy, or even melodrama."

"Do you mean that she's always playing a part? Why, don't you believe—"

"Excuse me, Susan," said Gilbert, "I haven't formulated any creed on that subject, and I'd rather you'd make your conversation a little less Socratic, this morning, if it's quite the same to you."

"I beg your pardon, William; I know that with

your notions to loyalty to your friend, you wouldn't allow yourself to speculate about the nature of the woman he hoped to make his wife, and I honor you for your delicacy, though she's only another woman to me. Easton would deal the same with himself, if the case were yours."

Gilbert listened with a stolid but rather a haggard air, and his sister-in-law continued:

"I suppose she must make it difficult to treat her at times with the lofty respect that you'd like to use, and that you have to keep *him* in mind pretty constantly. And yet, I don't know, after all. It seems to me that if you interpret her behavior generously"—Gilbert winced a little at the words, used almost as Easton had once used them —"and make due allowance for his histrionic temperament, it can't be so very hard for an honorable man."

"The clemency of your sentiments in regard to Mrs. Farrell is a continual surprise to me, Susan, when I remember what an outfit you gave her the time we first talked of her," said Gilbert.

"Oh, you can easily convict me of inconsistency on any point," answered his sister-in-law. "But why shouldn't I see a change for the better in her? Why shouldn't I sincerely believe her capable of nobler things than I once did?"

"You have all the reasons in the world; and if you had none, still, optimism is amiable. But really, do you know this is getting very tiresome? Am I to spend all my leisure moments with you in philosophizing Mrs. Farrell? I'm willing to take

any version of her that you give me. How can I doubt her devotion to Easton when I see her getting ready to knit him a smoking-cap? I know she's sorry for having made that misunderstanding between him and me, for she said she was. Who wouldn't believe a handsome young woman when she says she's sorry? Perhaps another handsome young woman. Not I."

"Now you're talking in a very silly, cynical way, William, and you'd better say good morning, and come again when you're in a different mood."

"I'm willing enough to say good morning," returned Gilbert, and went.

He went by an attraction which he could not resist to Easton's room, and experienced again that heartquake with which he now always met his friend's eye, and which he was always struggling to prevent or avert. It was a thing which his nerves might be reasoned out of, with due thought, and it did not come, when he was once in Easton's presence and confronted him from time to time. But in the morning, when their eyes first met, or after any little absence, the shock was inevitable; and he knew, though he would not own it to himself, that he had been trying somehow to shun the encounter. The bitterest rage he had felt against his friend was bliss to this fear of the trust he saw in Easton's face. He could best endure it when he could meet him in Mrs. Farrell's presence. In the gay talk which he held with them together he could persuade himself that the harmless pleasure of the moment was all. He found a like respite when alone with her. He

did not pretend to himself that he tried to avoid her; he knew that he sought her with feverish eagerness; now and then in the pauses of her voice a haggard consciousness blotted his joy in her charm, but when he parted from her he was sensible of a stupid and craven apprehension, as if the fascination of her presence were also a safeguard beyond which he could not hope for mercy from himself. At such times it was torture to meet Rachel Woodward, and the shy friendship which had sprung up between them died of this pain. His haunting inward blame seemed to look at him again from her clear eyes; he accused himself in the tones of her voice; she confronted him like an outer conscience, even when her regard seemed explicitly to refuse intelligence of what was in his heart.

At dinner, that day, Mrs. Farrell was very bright-eyed and rather subdued; she looked like a woman who had been having a cry. She talked amiably with everybody, as was now her wont, and when she found herself, late in the afternoon, again on the piazza with Gilbert, she said, "You're sorry, I suppose."

"Not the least," he answered, with nervous abruptness. "Why should I be sorry? Because you made an outrageous speech to me?"

"You are rather a vindictive person, aren't you?" she asked, beginning again.

"No—I don't think so," returned Gilbert. "Do you?"

"You cherished a grudge against me a good while, and if you hadn't happened to overdo it you'd be still bearing malice, I suppose."

"And because you overdid it this morning you're able to pardon me now. I see the process of your reasoning. Well, hereafter I shall not offend you by smiling; I'm going to frown at everything you do."

"No, don't do that! I want you to be very kind to me."

"Yes? How is a gentleman to be kind to a lady?"

"Everything depends upon character and circumstance. If she isn't the wisest of her sex—so few of us are—and has been used to doing and saying quite what she pleased, without regard to consequences, and she finds herself in a position where circumspection is her duty, he ought to look about for her and guard her."

"From what?"

"Oh—hawks, and lynxes, and—cats. They're everywhere."

Mrs. Farrell sat down on the benching and drew from her pocket the balls of worsted which she had loosely rolled in a handkerchief, together with some knitting already begun, and went on with the work, while Gilbert stood before her, looking down at her.

"You oughtn't to have helped me with these this morning," she said, pushing the little balls about and sorting them for the right colors.

"You asked me to do it!"

"But you ought to have refused. It was because I thought you were trying to embarrass me, and take advantage of my foolishness, that I got angry and was rude to you."

Gilbert said nothing, and after a little more comparison of the worsteds Mrs. Farrell made her decision, and took her knitting in her hand.

"Help me, don't hinder me!" she went on in a low voice. "Don't be amused at me; let me alone; keep away from me; don't make me talked about!"

"Shall I go now?" asked Gilbert, huskily.

Mrs. Farrell looked up at him in astonishment that dispersed all other emotions. "Oh, good gracious!" she cried, "they're all alike, after all! No, you poor—*man*, you! You must stay, now, till some one comes up; and don't run off the instant they do come! And you must keep on talking, *now*. Come, let us converse of various matters—

> "'Whether the sea is boiling hot,
> And whether pigs have wings.'

There, thank Heaven! there comes Mrs. Stevenson. Pay some attention to her. Ask her about her art, as she calls it, and try to seem interested. Mrs. Stevenson, I'm in despair over these worsteds. I can make nothing of them. Did you see any at the Bazar, the other day, when you were at Quopsaug? There ought to be crewels in that immense assortment. Where is that lavender? Where, oh, tell me where, is that little lavender gone? Perhaps it's in my pocket! Perhaps it's rolled under the bench. No! Then I've left it in my room,and I'll have to go after it. Excuse!" She caught her worsteds against her dress, and, turning a sidelong glance upon him as she whirled past, made "Talk!" with mute lips, and left him.

When she came back, neither he nor Mrs. Stevenson was there. They had apparently dispersed each other. She sat down awhile and knitted contentedly, and then went with her work to visit Mrs. Gilbert, who had not been at dinner.

"I'm very glad to see you," said Mrs. Gilbert, who had a flask of cologne in her hand, and moistened her forehead with it from time to time as she talked.

"Headache?" suggested Mrs. Farrell.

"Yes, only a minor headache—nothing heroic at all. It's merely something to occupy the mind. Do you happen to know where my brother is?"

"I left him with Mrs. Stevenson on the piazza, a few moments ago—talking art, I suppose." Mrs. Farrell adventured this. "They're not there, now; perhaps he's gone to look at her works."

"That's the smoking-cap, is it?" asked Mrs. Gilbert.

Mrs. Farrell held up at arm's length the small circle of the crown which she had so far knitted, and, gazing at it in deep preoccupation, answered, "Yes. These are the colors," she added. She leaned toward the other, and held them forward in both hands. "I think it's pretty well for West Pekin."

"I've no doubt it will be charming," said Mrs. Gilbert. "I don't approve of smoking, of course, but I hope he'll soon be able to use his smoking-cap. I was just thinking about you, Mrs. Farrell. I want Mr. Easton to get well as soon as possible, so that you can begin to have a good, long, commonplace courtship. If you were a daughter of mine—"

"I should be a pretty old daughter for you, Mrs. Gilbert," said Mrs. Farrell, flatteringly.

"Oh, I fancy not so very. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-four."

"And I'm forty-five, and look fifty. You're still in your first youth, and I'm in my first old age. I could easily be your mother."

"I wish you were! I should be the better for being your daughter, Mrs. Gilbert."

"I don't know. I shouldn't like to promise you that. But sometimes I think I could have been a good mother, or at least that children would have made a good mother of me, for I believe that half the goodness that women get credit for is forced upon them by those little helpless troubles. Men could be just as good if they had the care and burden of children—men are so very near being very good as it is."

"I *know* it," sighed Mrs. Farrell. "I never knew my own mother," she added; "if I had, I might have been a better woman. But are we to blame, I wonder, that we are not so good as we might have been—you if you'd had children, and I if I had had a mother?"

"Oh, I don't know. I dare say we shall never be judged so harshly anywhere else as we are in this world."

"That's true!" said Mrs. Farrell, bitterly.

"Not that we don't stand in need of judgment," continued the other, "as much as we do of mercy. It's wholesome, and I've never been unjustly blamed yet that I didn't feel I deserved it all, and

more. Oh, Mrs. Farrell, if I were really to speak to you as my daughter—"

"Don't call me Mrs. Farrell! Call me by my own name," cried the younger woman, impulsively. "Call me—Rosabel."

"Is that your name? I took it for granted you were Isabel. It's a very pretty name, very sweet and quaint; but I won't call you by it; it would make you more of a stranger to me than Mrs. Farrell does."

"Well, no matter. You shall call me what you like. Come; you said if you were to speak to me as your daughter—"

"Oh, I'm not certain whether I can go on, after all. Perhaps what I was going to say would degenerate into a kind of lecture on love and marriage in the abstract. If I had a daughter whose love affair had been so romantic as yours, I believe I should tell her to make all the surer of her heart on account of the romance. I'm afraid that in matters of love, romance is a dangerous element. Love ought to be perfectly ordinary, regular, and every-day like."

"Those are very heretical ideas!" said Mrs. Farrell, shaking her head.

"Yes, yes, I dare say," answered Mrs. Gilbert; "but, as I said before, I hope for both your sakes that you and Mr. Easton will have a good stupid wooing—at least a year of it—when he gets well."

"I shall not object to that, I'm sure," said Mrs. Farrell, demurely.

"No, I should hope you were too much of a woman. That's a woman's reign, the time of courtship. Her lover is never truly subject to her again. Make it as long as you can—long enough to get the romance out of your heads. And I wish you a sound quarrel or two."

"Oh! Now you *are* joking."

"Yes, I am. I hope you may never say an unkind word to each other. Have you a temper?"

"Not much, I believe."

"Has he?"

"I've been a little afraid of him once or twice."

"Already? Well, I think it's a pity you haven't a temper, too. Don't be one of the coldly self-possessed kind when he is angry; it's far better to be frightened."

"I will try always to be frightened. But I'm not sure that it was any violence of his that scared me, so much as his—"

"What?"

"Well, his goodness—or somebody else's badness. Mine, for example."

"Ah yes! He is a good man. It's a merit in a husband, goodness is; though I doubt very much if young people often think of that; they're so blinded by each other's idolatry that they have no sense of good or bad; they adore one quite as much as the other. And you must consider yourself a young person. You must have been very young when you were married, Mrs. Farrell."

"Yes, I was very young indeed. It seems a great while ago. And afterward my life was very

unhappy—after his death—they made it so. Mrs. Gilbert," she cried, "I know you don't like a great many things in me; but perhaps you would like more if you knew more."

"Yes, but don't tell them. One must have something to disapprove of in others, or how can one respect oneself?"

"I don't say that the fault was all theirs; I don't pretend that I was a very meek or manageable sister, but only that I could have been better with better people. They were vulgar to the tips of their fingers. And that drove me from them at last."

They sat some moments without saying anything, Mrs. Gilbert keeping her eyes intent upon Mrs. Farrell's face, whose fallen eyes in turn were fixed upon her work. Then the former said with a little sigh, "So you think I don't like some things about you! My dear, I like altogether too many. Yes," she continued, absently, studying the beautiful face, "I suppose *I* should, too."

"Should what?" asked Mrs. Farrell.

"Make a fool of myself, if I were a man. I never could resist such a face as yours; I only wonder they don't have more power. But recollect, my dear, that somehow, sometime, you'll be held responsible for your power, if you abuse it, even though we poor mortals seem to ask nothing better than to be made fools of by you."

"Was that what you were going to say?" asked Mrs. Farrell, lifting her eyes from her work and looking keenly at Mrs. Gilbert.

"No, it wasn't. But I'm so far off the track,

now, I won't say it. After all, it might seem like a glittering generality about—"

The women relaxed their wary regard; the elder did not offer to go on, and the younger did not urge her. Mrs. Farrell knitted half a round on the smoking-cap, as if to gain a new starting point, and then dropped her work in her lap and laid her hands, one on top of the other, over it. "Did you ever try inhaling the fumes of coffee for your headaches?" she asked.

"Oh, my dear, I gave that up away back in the Dark Ages," returned Mrs. Gilbert, resorting to the cologne.

"I suppose the cologne does you no good?"

"Not the least in the world. But one must do something."

"Yes," said Mrs. Farrell, drawing the word in with a long breath, "one must do something." She took up her work again and knitted awhile before she added, "I wonder if a man would go on forever doing something that he knew did him no good, as a woman does?"

"No, I suppose not. Men are very queer," said Mrs. Gilbert, gravely. "They're quite inert. But that gives them some of their advantages."

"They have pretty nearly all the advantages, haven't they?" asked Mrs. Farrell, quickly. "Even when some woman makes fools of them! At least when that happens they have all the other women on their side." As she knitted rapidly on she had now and then a little tremulous motion of the head that shook the gold hoops in her ears against her neck.

"Well, then they have a right to our pity."

"Oh, do you think so? It seems to me that *she* has a right to more." She looked down on either side of her at the floor. "I thought I brought both balls of that ashes of roses with me." Mrs. Gilbert looked about the carpet in her vicinity. "Don't trouble yourself. It's no matter. I think I won't use it here, after all. I'll use this brown. A woman never makes a fool of a man unless she respects him very much. Of course there must be something fascinating about him, or she wouldn't care to have him care for her, at all; it would be disgusting."

"Yes," said Mrs. Gilbert.

"And then," continued Mrs. Farrell, keeping her eyes on her work and knitting faster and faster, "if she has any heart at all, it must be half broken to think of what she's done. The falsest coquette that ever was would feel like bowing down to true love in a man; and what is she to do if ever the worst comes to the worst and she finds she's afraid she doesn't love him? She must know that his good faith is ten million times stronger than her looks, and that it has a claim which she must try to answer somehow. Shall she marry him out of pity, and put him to the shame of finding it out some day? That would be the worst kind of treachery. No, no; she couldn't do that! And can she tell him how wicked she has been, and ask him never to see her face or breathe her name or hear it spoken again? That would be easy, if it were only for her! But if she did this, if she could have the courage to kill his faith in her with such a blow as that, and to

blacken his life with shame for having loved her, what better would she be than a murderess?"

She grew pale as she spoke, but no tremor now shook the hoops in her ears; she only wrought the more swiftly and kept her eyes upon the flying needle, while a kind of awe began to express itself in the gaze that Mrs. Gilbert bent upon her.

"What should you think *then* of the power of a pretty face?" asked Mrs. Farrell, flashing a curious look of self-scorn upon her. "What could the pretty face do for her, or for him? Could it help her to forgive herself, or help him to forget her? And which would have the greatest claim to the pity of the spectators?—supposing there were spectators of the tragedy, and there nearly always are. Come, imagine some such woman, Mrs. Gilbert, and imagine her your daughter—you were imagining *me* your daughter, just now—and tell me what you would say to her. You wouldn't know what to say, even to your own daughter? Oh! I thought you might throw some light upon such a case." She had lifted her eyes with fierce challenge to Mrs. Gilbert's, but now she dropped them again upon her work. "But what if the case were still worse? Can you imagine so much as its being worse?"

"Yes, I can imagine its being worse," said Mrs. Gilbert, whose visage seemed to age suddenly with a premonition that a thing long dreaded, long expected, was now coming, in spite of all attempted disbelief.

"Oh yes, certainly! You were wondering just now that beauty didn't have greater power! Sup-

pose that even in all this wretchedness, this miserable daughter of yours was afraid— Ah! Mrs. Gilbert," she cried, starting violently to her feet, "you were trying a minute ago—don't you think I knew your drift?—to peep into my heart! How do you like to have it flung wide open to you?" She confronted Mrs. Gilbert, who had risen too, with a wild reproach, as if she had made the wrong another's by tearing the secret of it from her own breast. Mrs. Gilbert answered her nothing, and in another instant she faltered, "Don't blame him, don't be harsh with him. But, oh, in the name of mercy, send him away!"

Chapter XII

IT was already dark when Gilbert knocked at his sister-in-law's door. She was sitting in the chair from which she had risen at parting with Mrs. Farrell, and into which she sank again at her going. Gilbert sat down before her, but did not speak.

"Have you made up your mind when you shall go, William?" she asked, gently.

"I haven't made up my mind that I shall go at all," he answered, in a sullen tone.

"But I think you had better," she said as before.

"I am always glad, Susan, of advice that costs me nothing," he returned, with an affectation of his habitual lightness.

"I have been thinking about you, William, and I want you to go to New York at once. Your friend is out of all danger, now, and it's you who are in danger."

"You know I never was good at conundrums, Mrs. Gilbert. May I ask what particular peril is threatening me at present?"

"A peril that an honest man runs from—the danger of doing a great wrong, of committing a cowardly breach of faith."

"Upon my word, Susan, you are using words—"

"Oh, don't catch at my words, my poor boy. Have you nothing to reproach yourself with? If you haven't, I beg your pardon with all my heart, and I will be glad to take back my words, yes, take them back upon my knees!"

"What is all this coil about? What are you worrying me with these emotional mysteries for?" demanded Gilbert, angrily, yet with a note of ungenuine bluster in his voice. "What are you trying to get at?"

"Your heart, William; your conscience, your honor, your self-respect. Do you think I am blind? Do you think I have not seen it all? If you will tell me you don't know what I mean, and make me believe it, I will never call myself unhappy again."

"If you have suffered yourself to be made uncomfortable by any affair or condition of mine," said Gilbert, "I advise you to console yourself by reflecting that it doesn't really concern you. How long is it," he demanded, savagely, "since you have felt authorized to interfere in my questions of honor and conscience?"

"Ever since a motherless boy let a childless woman love him. Oh, think that I do love you, my dear, and speak to you out of my jealousy for your stainless good faith, your sacred friendship, your unsullied life! You know what I mean. Think that she is pledged by everything that is good in her to your friend. If you believe she does not love him, let her break with him how and when she will. But don't you be her wicked hope—wickeder a thousand times than she!—don't be the temptation,

the refuge of her falseness. Leave her to herself! You could only add your treason to hers by staying!"

"Wicked hope, temptation, treason—this is all rather theatrical for you, Susan," said Gilbert, with an attempt to smile. He frowned instead. "And what do I owe to Easton in the way of loyalty? Do you know how little care he has had for me? Do you know—"

"No, no, no! I don't know, I *won't* know! If he has wronged you in any way, you are only the more bound to be faithful to him in such a case as this. But I will never believe that Easton has wronged you willingly, and you don't believe it, either, whatever the trouble is that she made between you—you know you don't. You are talking away your own sense of guilt, or trying to. Well, I can't blame you for that; but keep these things to silence your conscience with when you are alone; you will need them all. How long have you watched by your friend's pillow with the hope of revenge in your heart?"

Mrs. Gilbert rose from her chair and walked to one of the windows, and then came and paused in front of Gilbert, where he now stood leaning against the mantelpiece. "Come," she entreated, "you *will* go away, won't you, William? I know you never meant him wrong. It has all been something that has stolen upon you, but you will go now, won't you?"

"No, I will not go!"

"You will remain?"

"Till such time as I see fit. I am not a boy, to be sent hither and thither."

"What good will you remain for?" demanded the woman, sternly. "Or do you choose to remain for evil? Every hour that you remain deepens your responsibility. Some things have been talked of already. How long will it be before the whole house sees that you are in love with the woman promised to your friend?"

"Do you suppose I care what this houseful of spying, tattling women see or say?"

"There are no spies and no tattlers; but if they were, a man who hadn't shut his senses against his own conscience *would* care. No one blames you as yet, but the time will soon be when you will make the blame all your own."

"I wouldn't ask her to share it."

"Oh, very fine! you think your brave words will make a brave affair of a cowardly, sneaking treason!"

"Susan!"

"William! These people who are beginning to talk you over do not know what I know. They see that you are beginning to be fascinated with her, as *he* was. They don't know that you have believed her false and shallow from the first, and that if you have any hopes of her love now, they are in your belief that after all that has happened she is still too false and shallow to be true to him. *He* was taken with what was best in her, with all that he believed was good. But you have dared to love her in the hope that she had no principles and no heart.

You are ready to lay your honor at her feet, to give all that makes life worth having for what would make your whole life a sorrow and a shame. If you could commit this crime against Easton and yourself and her, if you could win the heart you think so empty and so fickle, what would you do with it? If you could make her false enough to love you, how could you ever have peace again? How could you ever meet each other's eyes without seeing the memory of your common falsehood in them? Think— Oh, my dear, dear boy, forgive me! I know that it isn't your *fault;* I take it all back, all that I have said against you; I don't blame you for loving her—how could you help it? She is charming—yes, she charms me, too; and to a man she must make all other women seem so blank and poor and plain! But now you mustn't love her: she cannot be yours without a wrong that when you're away from her you must shudder at. And—and—you will go, won't you, William?"

Gilbert's arm dropped from the mantel where it lay, to his side. "I will go," he said, sullenly. "But I acknowledge nothing of all that you have chosen to attribute to me, motive or fact. And you must be aware that you have said things to me that are not to be forgiven."

He turned to go out of the room, without looking at her, but she cried after him: "Never mind forgiving me, my dear. Only go now, in time to forgive yourself, and I will gladly let you hate me all your life. Good-by, good-by; God bless you and keep you!"

He did not answer, nor turn about, but closed the door behind him and left her standing with her hands clenched, in the gesture of her final appeal. She sank into her chair, spent by the victory she had won.

Gilbert went to the room which he had been occupying since his constant attendance upon Easton had ceased to be necessary, and began to gather together the things scattered about the room. It was a great and bewildering labor, but he had succeeded in heaping many of them into his valise when Rachel Woodward appeared with his lighted lamp. Then he knew that he had been working in the dark. "Oh, thank you, thank you," he said, in a strange voice of unconscious, formal politeness. "I—I was just going away, and it's rather difficult getting these things together without a light."

"You are going away?" she asked.

"Yes; I had a letter this morning recalling me to New York, but I hadn't made up my mind to go until just now. I'm going to try to catch the express; I'll get a man to drive me over from the hotel, and I'll send him back from there for this bag."

"And you are going at once?" she said, almost gladly.

"Yes," he said; and he gave her an address, to which he asked her to have her mother send the account of her charges against him. With a little hesitation he offered her his hand, and she took it with something like a show of penitence. "Good-by," said he, "I hope if you ever have occasion to

think of me, you'll be lenient to my memory; and if it isn't the thing for me to say that I feel as if I somehow owed you a debt of gratitude for being what you are, why, I hope you'll excuse it to the confusion of the parting moment."

Rachel's face flushed a little, but she did not try to respond to the odd compliment, and Gilbert said he must go and take leave of Easton. He went abruptly to his friend's room, but faltered a moment before he softly turned the door-knob. It was dark within, and the long and even breathing from the bed where Easton lay revealed that he was asleep. Gilbert stood a moment beside him, and then leaned over and peered through the darkness with his face close to the sleeper's. Neither stirred. Gilbert waited another moment, and with a heavy sigh crept from the room. He went to his sister's door, at which he knocked, but impatiently opened it without waiting to be bidden enter. Mrs. Gilbert looked at him without surprise.

"I came back on a small matter of business, Susan. I neglected to say, a moment ago, that I think myself an infamous wretch, totally unworthy of your pains and affection. You are right in everything. I thought I'd mention it in justice to you; we all like to have our little impressions confirmed. Good-by."

"Oh, my dear, good boy! I knew you wouldn't leave me so; I knew you would come back." She took his hand between her own, and he bent over and kissed the pale fingers that clasped his with their weak, nervous stress. "You're so good, my

dear, that I've half a mind not to let you go; but I think you had better go. Don't you?"

"Yes; I don't wish to stay. Very likely I should be able to behave myself; but it would be an experiment, and I haven't time for it. On the whole," he said, with a smile, "I'd as lief be innocent as virtuous."

"Oh, yes indeed," answered Mrs. Gilbert, "it's preferable in some cases, decidedly. You're not so young as you were when I used to kiss you, William," she added, "but neither am I, and I'm really going to give you a kiss now for your exemplary obedience, and for good-by."

"You overwhelm me, Susan. *None* of the women at Woodward farm seem able to resist my fascinations. I think perhaps I had better go away on *your* account."

He stooped down and took the kiss she had volunteered, and then with another clasp of the hand he went.

The moon had risen, and was striking keenly through the thin foliage of the avenue of white birches which the highway became in its approach to the farmhouse, and in the leaf-broken light he saw drifting before him a figure which he knew. He stopped, and trembled from head to foot. Then, whatever may have seemed the better part for him to choose, he plunged forward again, and overtook her.

"You are going away," she said, half turning her face upon him. "I came here so that you could not go without seeing me. I could not bear

to have you go away thinking I was such a heartless woman as you do, with no care or regret for all the trouble I've made you."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Gilbert; "I wasn't thinking so much of you as of a man—excuse the egotism—who has a great deal more to answer for."

"Oh no, no!"

"Sometime, when you tell Easton about it all, as you must, I want you to excuse me to him; no one else can. Tell him—tell him that all I had to urge in my own behalf was that I loved you."

"No, no, no! You mustn't speak to me in that way! It's too dreadful."

"Oh yes, it's dreadful. But you can excuse it if he couldn't. How could you excuse me if I didn't love you? Why else should we be parting? I must have loved you from the first—before I knew. What else could have made me so bitter with poor Easton about what he told you? I knew he never meant me any harm; I knew he couldn't; he was a man to have died for me. I was mad with jealousy. Did you mean it? You managed it well! But I loved you— What a fool I am! Don't come any farther; in Heaven's name go back! No," he said, perceiving that she faltered in her steps, as if she were about to sink, "don't stop—come on." He had caught her hand, and now he drew it through his arm, and hurried forward. "Yes, come! I have something to ask you. I want you to tell me that since you have felt yourself bound to him, you have never—I want you to tell me that I was

altogether in a delusion about you, and that you have done nothing to make me recreant to him."

"Oh, oh, oh!" she moaned. "How pitiless you are! How hard, how hard you make it for me!" She released her hand and pressed it against his arm in the eagerness of her entreaty. "Leave me—do leave me—the poor hope that I have seemed worse than I was!"

He threw up his arm across his forehead and started a few paces onward.

She hastened after him. "And do believe," she implored him, "that I only wanted to meet you to-night to say—to—to—somehow to make it easier for you to go. Indeed, indeed— Don't leave me to despair!"

He halted, and confronted her. "Was that what you came for? I thought it might have been to see if you couldn't make me say what I have just said; I fancied you might have wished to send me away beggared in everything that makes a man able to face the past and the future, and to meet the eyes of honest men. I deserved it. But I was mistaken, was I?" he asked, with a bitter derision. "Well, good-by!"

"No, no! You shall never go, believing such a thing as that! If I *hated* you—hated you to death—how could I wish to do that to you? Ah, you *don't* believe it. You—"

But he turned from her, and hurried swiftly down the lane without another look or word.

Chapter XIII

THE summer was past, but the pageant of autumn was yet undimmed. In the wet meadows of the lowlands, even in the last days of August, before the goldenrod was in its glory, the young maples lit their torches; and what might have seemed their dropping fires crept from sumac to sumac, by the vines in the grass and over the walls, till all the trees, kindling day by day, stood at last a flame of red and gold against the sky. The jay scolded among the luminous boughs; across the pale heaven the far-voiced crows swam in the mellow sunshine. The pastures took on again the green of May; the patches of corn near the farmhouses rustled dry in the soft wind; between the ranks of the stalks lolled the rounded pumpkins.

Many of the summer boarders at Woodward farm had already gone home. The two young girls had gone with each a box full of fern roots and an inordinate pasteboard case full of pressed ferns. Mrs. Stevenson had stayed later than she had meant, in order to complete a study of cat-tails with autumn foliage. It was the best thing that she had done, and really better than anybody had ever expected her to do. It sold afterward for enough money to confirm her in her belief that wifehood

was no more the whole of womanhood than husbandhood was of manhood, and that to expect her to keep house would be the same as asking every man, no matter what his business might be, to make his own clothes and mend his own shoes.

The husbands of three of the married ladies came one final Saturday night, and departed with them by a much later train than they had ever taken before, on the Monday morning following. These ladies were going home to take up their domestic burdens again for the sake of the men who had toiled all summer long in the city for them. It was a sacrifice, but, thanks to the wonderful air of West Pekin, and to Mrs. Woodward's excellent country fare, they were equal to it; at least they did not complain, or said they did not, which is the same thing. The driver from the station came to fetch them away with his yellow Concord stage, and the ladies got upon the outside seats with him, and waved their handkerchiefs to those left behind. The husbands tried to shout back something epigrammatic as they drove off, but these things are usually lost in the rattle of the wheels, and, even when heard, often prove merely an earnest of good will in the humorous direction, and are apt to fall flat upon the kindliest ear.

Mrs. Gilbert was among the latest who remained. Under the circumstances she might not have chosen to remain, and perhaps her prolonged stay was an offering to appearances, the fetish before which women will put themselves to any torment. Her husband was not coming for her, and she sat alone

amid her preparations for departure when Mrs. Farrell, in passing her open door, lingered half wistfully and looked in upon her. Since that day which was doubtless always in both their minds whenever they met, they had neither shunned nor sought each other, but there had been no intimacy between them.

"Won't you come in, Mrs. Farrell?" asked the elder lady, with a glance at the jaded beauty of the other.

"You are really on the wing at last," said Mrs. Farrell, evasively accepting the invitation. She came in, looking sad and distraught, and sat down with an impermanent air.

"Yes, I suppose one may call it *wing*, for want of a better word," said Mrs. Gilbert, who indeed did not look much like flying. Presently she added, in the silence that ensued, "You are not looking very well, Mrs. Farrell."

"No?" said Mrs. Farrell. "Why should I look well? But I don't know that I don't feel as well as usual in the way I suppose you mean."

"I'm sorry you don't feel well in every way," said Mrs. Gilbert, responding to so much of an advance as might be made to her in Mrs. Farrell's dispirited words; and after another little silence, she said, "Mr. Easton seems to have gained a great deal in the last week."

"Yes, he is very much better; he is going away soon; he will not be here many days longer."

"Mrs. Farrell," said Mrs. Gilbert, "I wish you would let me say something to you."

"Oh, say anything you like. Why shouldn't you?" returned Mrs. Farrell, not resentfully, but in the same dispirited tone.

"I know you don't trust me," began Mrs. Gilbert."

"There isn't much trust lost between us, is there?" asked Mrs. Farrell as before.

"But I hope you will believe," continued Mrs. Gilbert, "that when we last spoke here together I wasn't trying to interfere with what you might consider entirely your own affair from any mean or idle motive. If I was trying to pry into your heart, as you said then, it was because it seemed to me that it was partly my affair, too."

"I didn't mean to resent anything you did or said," answered Mrs. Farrell. "It wasn't my own affair altogether. Nothing that's wrong can be one's own affair, I suppose; it belongs to the whole world." Mrs. Gilbert looked a little surprised at the wisdom of this, which had its own curious pathos, coming from whom it did, and Mrs. Farrell spoke again with sudden impetuosity, "Oh, Mrs. Gilbert, I hope you are not judging me harshly!"

"No, I am trying not to judge you at all."

"Because," continued Mrs. Farrell, "whatever I have done, I am not doing my own pleasure now, and my part isn't an easy one to play."

"I'm sorry you must play a part at all—my dear," said Mrs. Gilbert, with impulsive kindness. "Why must you? Or, no, now it *is* all your affair, and I have no right to ask you anything. Don't tell me —don't speak to me about it!"

"But if I don't speak to you, whom shall I speak to? And I shall go wild if I don't speak to some one! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Do?"

"Yes, yes; it drives me to despair! Ought I to break with him now, at once, or wait and wait? Or shall I go on and marry him? I respect and honor him with my whole heart, indeed I do; and if he took me away with him—away to Europe, somewhere—for years and years, I know I should be good, and I should try hard to make him happy, and never, never let him know that I didn't care for him as he did for me. Women often marry for money, for ambition, for mere board and lodging; you know they do; and why shouldn't I marry him because I can't bear to tell him I'm afraid I don't love him?"

"That's a question that nobody can answer for you," said Mrs. Gilbert. "But all those marriages are abominable; and even to marry from respect seems wrong—hideous."

"Yes, oh yes, it *is* hideous; it would be making this wearisome deceit a lifelong burden. I know what it would be better than anyone could tell me. I feel the horror of it every minute, and it isn't for myself that I care now; it's the shame to him; it seems to ridicule and degrade him; it's ghastly! And he so generous and high-minded, he never could think that I wasn't always just as good and constant as he was. No, I'm not fit for him, and I never was. He's whole worlds above me, and it would wear my life out trying to be what he thinks

me, and even then I couldn't be it. Oh, why did he fall in love with *me*, when there are so many women in the world who would have been so happy in the love of such a man? Why did he ever see me? Why did he come here? Good-by, Mrs. Gilbert, good-by! I wish I were dead!"

Mrs. Gilbert caught her in an impetuous embrace of pity and atonement. Yet, an hour after, when she finally parted from her, it was by no means with equal tenderness; it was guardedly, almost coldly.

A week later, Ben Woodward asked his mother's leave to go visit his married sister, who lived at Rock Island, Illinois. He urged that, now her boarders were mostly gone, she did not need him so much about the house; he hung his head and kicked the chips of the woodpile by which they stood. She looked at him a moment, and, fetching a long breath, said he was a good son and she wished he should please himself.

The next morning he kissed her and Rachel, shook hands with his father, nodded to his brothers, and started off toward the village, carrying his bag. At the foot of the hill on which the village stood he met Mrs. Farrell, who was coming from the post-office with letters in one hand. With the other she held by their stems some bright autumn leaves, and she stooped from time to time and added to them from the fallen splendors about her feet. It ought to have been a poet or a painter who met Mrs. Farrell in the country road, under the tinted maples, that morning, but it was only a simple farm boy whose soul was inarticulate in its tender pain.

When she saw him she put the leaves and letters together in one hand, and began to feel in her pocket with the other. His face flushed as he came up to her, where she stood waiting for him, and blanched with a foolish, hopeless pleasure in the sight of her.

"Why, Ben!" she said, sadly, yet with an eye that would gleam a little as she let it stray over the poor fellow's uncouth best clothes, "are you going away?" She must have known that he was.

"Yes," said Ben, uneasily.

"And did you mean to go without saying good-by to me?" she asked, with soft reproach.

"Well, I didn't see what good it was going to do."

"Why, we might never meet again, Ben," she said, solemnly. And as Ben shifted his bag from his one hand to the other, she took the hand left free and tried to make its great red fingers close over something she pressed into the palm. "I want you to take this to remember me by, Ben," she said; but the young fellow, glancing at the gold pencil she had left in his grasp, shook his head and put the gift back in her hand.

"I don't need anything to remember you by, Mrs. Farrell," he said, huskily, looking at her half-amused, half-daunted face. "If you can give me anything to forget you by, I'll take it," and Ben, as if he had made a point which he might not hope to surpass, was going to press by her, when she placed herself full in front of him and would not let him.

"Oh, Ben," she said, "how can you talk so to

me? You know I have always thought you such a friend of mine, and you know I like you and think ever so much of your good opinion. I shall never let you pass till you take back those cruel words. Will you take them back?"

"Yes," said Ben, helpless before those still, dark eyes, "I will if you want I should."

"And will you try to remember me—remember me kindly, and not think hardly of anything I've done?"

"You know well enough, Mrs. Farrell," said the boy, with a sort of ireful pathos, "that I would do anything you asked me to, and always would. Don't, don't mind what I said. You know how I like you, and wouldn't forget you if I could."

"Oh, Ben, Ben, I'm very unhappy," she broke out.

"Don't mind it," said Ben, with the egotism of love, but touchingly unselfish even in this egotism. "You needn't be troubled about me. I always knew just as well as you that it was all foolishness, and I didn't ever mean to let it vex you. Don't mind it; I shall get over it, I suppose, and if I never do, I hope even when you're a married woman it won't be any harm for me to think you cared enough for me to be sorry that—that I was such a fool."

She looked at him, puzzled by his misconception, but, divining it, she said instantly, "No indeed, Ben; whatever becomes of me, I shall be only too proud to think of you as my dear, dear friend. I haven't had so many that I could spare you. I only wish I half deserved you. Ben!" cried Mrs.

Farrell, abruptly, "do you know what I wish I was? I wish I was five or six years younger, so as to be a little younger than you; and I wish I was a good, simple girl, like some of these about here, and you had bought a farm out in Iowa, and you were taking me out there with you this peaceful, lovely morning."

"Don't, Mrs. Farrell!" implored Ben.

"I do, Ben, I do! And if I were such a girl as that, I would work for you like a slave from morning till night; and I would obey you in everything; and all that I should ask would be that you should keep me there out of sight of everybody, and never let me go anywhere, or speak to a living soul but you. And, oh, Ben, you would be very kind and patient with me, wouldn't you? But it can't be, it can't be."

She stooped down and gathered up some letters which had slipped from her hand; Ben let her; he had his bag to hold, and he was not used to offering little services to ladies. When she lifted her face again and confronted him, "*He* is a good man, too; don't you think he is, Ben?" she asked, brushing her hand across her eyes.

"Yes; there a'n't many like him," answered Ben, soberly.

"Do you think he's too good for me?"

"I don't think anybody could be that, you know well enough, Mrs. Farrell," said Ben, with a note of indignation, as if he suspected a latent mockery in this appeal to his judgment.

"Yes, yes, that's true, I know that," said Mrs.

Farrell, hastily. "I meant, don't you think he's better than—than Mr. Gilbert?"

"I never had anything against Mr. Gilbert," answered Ben, loyally. "He took good care of his friend."

"Oh yes! But—but—Ben," she faltered, "there is something—something I would like to ask you. It's a very strange thing to ask you; but there is no one else. Did you ever think—sometimes I was afraid, you know, that Mr. Gilbert—it makes me very, very unhappy—was getting to—to care for me—"

"No, I never thought so," answered Ben.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad. But if he had?"

"I should say such a man ought to be shot."

"Yes, oh yes—he ought to be shot," she assented, hysterically. "But, Ben—but *you* cared for me, didn't you?"

"Yes. But that was a very different thing. Mr. Easton wasn't my friend, as he was Mr. Gilbert's, and I commenced caring for you long before he was laid there sick and helpless. He would be just as much to blame as if you was married to Mr. Easton already. I don't see any difference. But I don't think he could. You must have been mistaken."

"Perhaps I was. Yes, I must have been mistaken. I'm glad to have you speak so frankly, Ben. It *is* too horrible to believe. For if he had been so, of course it could only be because he saw, or thought he saw, something in me that would let him. And you never could think anything so bad, so heartless, of me, could you, Ben?"

"No, I couldn't, Mrs. Farrell," answered Ben, decidedly. "What's the use—"

"Thank you, Ben—thank you. I knew you couldn't; it would be too monstrous. Oh yes, it's just like some horrid dream. Such a woman as that wouldn't deserve any mercy—not if she had allowed him to think so for one single instant. Would she?"

"Why, we can all find mercy, I suppose, if we go the right way to the right place for it," answered Ben, seriously.

"Yes—but I don't mean that kind. I mean, she wouldn't deserve— Ben, if you were in Mr. Easton's place, and the girl you were engaged to had allowed some one else—just for the excitement, you know; not because she wanted him to, or was so wicked and heartless, but just foolish—to think she might let him like her, you never would speak to her again, would you, Ben? You never would forgive her?"

"No, I don't know as I could overlook a thing like that."

"Of course you couldn't! You always see things in the right light, Ben; you are so good—oh! how cruel, how perfectly unrelenting you are! That is—I don't mean that—I mean— Oh, Ben, if you felt toward her—I oughtn't to say it, I know; but just for instance—as you feel, as you used to feel, toward *me*, Ben"—she implored, while her tearful eyes dwelt on his—"could you forgive me—*her*, I mean?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Ben.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Ben! But you oughtn't, you oughtn't!" she cried. "I mustn't keep you, Ben. Good-by. And now you'll let me give you the pencil, won't you? It isn't for you. It's for some nice girl you'll be sure to find, out there. Tell her I sent it to her; and, oh, tell her the best thing she can do is to be good! I hope you'll have a pleasant time and get back safely; I sha'n't be here when you come home."

She did not shake hands with him at parting, and they went their several ways. At the turn of the road she looked back and saw him watching her. She took out her handkerchief and waved it to him; then, rounding the corner, she pressed it to her eyes, and stooped and made a little hasty toilet at the brook that ran along the roadside. When she rose she saw Easton at the head of the avenue, coming slowly down toward her. She went courageously to meet him. "Are my eyes red?" she asked. "I have just been shedding the parting tear over poor Ben. He's a good boy, and I felt sorry for him. I've been his first love for several years, you know."

"Yes," said Easton, with the superiority that men feel toward much younger men's passions. "That was plain enough from the beginning."

Mrs. Farrell looked at him. He was pale and thin from his long lying in bed, but his old tone and manner were coming back, and he was growing better, though he was still far from strong. They were lingering at the farm while the fair weather lasted, that he might profit by the air as long as it

could do him good, though he had meant to go before this time.

"I've brought you about all the letters there were in the office, this morning," she said. "Do you want them now?"

"I suppose they must be read. Yes; let us go back to the piazza and open them there. You'll be glad to rest after your walk to the village."

"Is that why you want to get at your letters? I'm not tired at all, and I'd rather walk on."

"Well, whatever you like. You've unmasked my deceit about the letters. I certainly don't care to read them. I see that I had better never try to keep anything from you."

"Should you like me to tell you everything about myself?"

"Why, you did that once, didn't you?"

"Oh, that was nothing. I mean everything I think and feel and do."

"If you wished to tell me. I can't know too much about you."

"Don't be so sure of that. Suppose I had something that lay very heavy on my conscience, and that I didn't like to tell you. I ought to, oughtn't I?"

"Why, if it didn't concern me—"

"But if it did concern you?"

"Well, still, I'm not so sure about your obligation to tell it. If you could endure to keep it, you might have a greater right to keep it than I should have to know it. The only comfort of confession is that it seems to disown our wrong and make it a sort

of public property, a part of evil in general, and lets us begin new, like people who have taken the benefit of the bankrupt law." He spoke these truisms in a jesting tone. "I shall always be willing to adopt half of your sins. How have you been injuring me, Rosabel?" he asked, with the smile which Mrs. Farrell's speculative seriousness was apt to call forth; the best men find it so hard to believe that a charming woman can be in earnest about anything but her good looks.

"Oh, I was supposing a case," she answered, with a sigh. "You do think I have some faults, then?"

"Yes, I think you have; but that doesn't make any difference."

"But you can't pretend you like them?"

"Let me think! Do I like your faults?"

"Don't joke. Which do you think is the worst?" she demanded, stopping and confronting him with a look of solemnity which he found amusing.

"Upon my word," he answered, with a laugh, "I don't believe I could say."

"What are any of my faults?"

"How can I tell?"

"Am I willful? Am I proud? Am I bad-tempered? What's the thing you would find it hardest to forgive me?"

"You must give me time to think. And when I've forgiven you a great many times for a great variety of offenses I will tell you which I found the hardest. You must remember that I've had no sort of experience yet."

"That's because you don't know at all how

badly I've treated you. What do you think of my laughing at you that day when I went off to the schoolhouse with Rachel Woodward? Don't you consider it heartless? If I hadn't been the worst person in the world, could I have done it?"

Easton smiled at the zeal of her self-condemnation. "I dare say there had been something very ridiculous in my behavior. If you can remember any particular points that amused you, I shouldn't mind laughing them over with you, now."

"How good you are!" she murmured, regarding him absently. "I should be the worst woman in the world, shouldn't I, if I deceived you in the least thing? But I never will; no, no, I couldn't! Your not thinking it anything would only make it the harder to bear. Don't you know how killing it is to have people suppose you're too good to do things when you've done them? It's awful. That's one good thing about Rachel Woodward. She thinks I'm a miserable sinner, but she likes me; and you mustn't like me unless you think I'm a miserable sinner. Oh no, I couldn't let you. I'll tell you: I want you to think me perfectly reckless and fickle; I want you to believe that I'm so foolish, don't you know, that even while you were lying sick there, if he'd let me, I should have been quite capable of flirting with—with Ben Woodward."

Easton burst into a laugh: "That's altogether too abominable for anybody to believe, Rosabel. Can't you try me with something a shade less atrocious? Come, I'm willing to think ill of you, since you wish it; but do be reasonable! Won't

you?" he asked, looking round into her face, as they walked along. "Well, then, try to help me in another way. What shall I do about Rachel Woodward? I don't know how I'm to express my gratitude fitly or acceptably for all the trouble she's had with me in this most humiliating sickness of mine. Do you suppose she could be persuaded into accepting any sort of help? Do you think she would care to become a painter, if she had the facilities quite to her mind?"

"She would," replied Mrs. Farrell, "if she didn't expect sometime to get married, like other people; there's always that *if* in a woman's aspirations. But that's neither here nor there. If you think you can ever contrive to reward Rachel Woodward for doing what she thinks her duty, you're very much mistaken."

"It's rather hard to be left so much in her debt."

"Yes; but she doesn't consider you indebted; that's one comfort."

Easton mused awhile. "Do you know," he said, presently, "I sometimes wonder Gilbert didn't take a fancy to our difficult little friend. They're sufficiently unlike, and he would be just the man to feel the pale charm of her character."

"Do you think so?" asked Mrs. Farrell, with cold evasion. "I supposed Mr. Gilbert was too worldly a man to care for a simple country girl like Rachel Woodward."

"Oh, you're very much mistaken. He'd be altogether unworldly in a matter of that kind. He

would be true to himself at any cost. That was what always charmed me so in Gilbert. He had the air and talk of a light man, but he was as true as steel under it all. Every day a man has a hundred occasions to prove himself mean or great, and Gilbert, without any show of being principled this way or that, always did the manly and generous and loyal thing."

"Shall we go back, now?" asked Mrs. Farrell. "I *am* rather tired, after all."

"Will you take my arm?" asked Easton. "It isn't of much use yet, I'm ashamed to think, but it will be. Did you despise me when I was lying there sick?"

"Despise you?"

"Why, I think a sick man is a contemptible kind of creature. You women seem to be able to make anything gracious and appropriate, even suffering; but a sick man can only be an odious burden. We ought to be allowed to crawl away like hurt animals into holes and clefts of rocks, and take the chances, unseen, of dying or living. Were you able to pity me very much?"

"I don't see why you ask such things," she faltered. "Don't you think I did?"

"Oh yes, too much. Sometimes I'm afraid that, without your knowing it, it's been all pity from the beginning. I dare say every decently modest man wonders what a woman finds to love in him. I wanted you to love me from the first instant I saw you, but I never concealed from myself that I wasn't worth a thought of yours. What a curious

thing it is that makes one willing to receive everything for nothing." He laid his left hand upon her fingers where they passively clung to his right arm. "Why, how cold your hand is!" he said. "It seems incredible that it's going to be *my* hand some day! Everything else under the sun has its price; you slave for it, you risk your life for it, you buy it somehow. But the divinest thing in the world is *given*, it has no price, it's invaluable; we can't *merit* a woman's love any more than we can merit God's mercy. Come, take yourself from me again! I've never given you a fair chance to say me nay. You must acknowledge that you never had time to answer that question of mine. Before you could decide whether you could endure me or not you had to pity me so much that you were biased in my favor. I ought to set you free, and let you judge again whether you would have me!"

Her breath went and came quickly, as he spoke in this mixed jest and earnest. He tried to make her meet his eye, peering round into her face, but she would not look at him. If this was the release, the opportunity, so long and wildly desired, it found her helpless to seize it. She moved her head from side to side like one stifling. "Oh, don't! How can you?" she gasped. "Don't talk so any more," she entreated. "I can't bear it!"

She turned her face away; he tenderly pressed her arm against his side. They were near the house again, and she slipped her hand from his arm and fled indoors. He blushed with joy, and walked on down the birch avenue, where she saw him sitting,

after a while, on a stone by the wayside. She went to join him, holding forward, as she drew near him, a handful of letters. "We both forgot these," she said, with a dim smile.

"Oh yes," he laughed. She glanced down at the stone where he sat, and up at that clump of birches through whose thin foliage the sun fell upon him, and shivered with the recognition of the spot where she had parted from Gilbert. "Sit down, Rosabel," he said, making a place for her at his side. "This stone is large enough for both of us. I want you to help me read my letters."

"No, no!" she faintly pleaded; "let me stand awhile. And do you—do you think it's well for you to sit—just here?"

"Why, yes," he returned. "It seems a sufficiently salubrious spot, and this is a most obliging rock. If you won't share it with me—here!" he said, touching another stone in front of his own seat, "sit here! Then I can see your face whenever I look up, and that will be better even than having you at my side. Ah! Now for the letters," he cried, when she had suffered him to arrange her as he would, and she gave them into his hand.

He ran them quickly over before opening any, and, "Why!" he exclaimed, holding up one of them, "did you know whom we have kept waiting? Gilbert! It's too bad, poor old fellow! Didn't you notice his letter, you incurious Fatima?"

"I never saw his handwriting. How could I know his letter?"

"Of course! That might have occurred to me if

I hadn't known it so well myself. Never mind! We'll keep Gilbert a little longer, since we've kept him so long already, and have him last of all, to take away the bad taste, if these are not pleasant reading." He laid Gilbert's letter aside, and opened the others and commented on them one after another; but her eyes continually wandered to the unopened letter, do what she might to keep them on the level of the page he was reading. At last he took up Gilbert's letter; a shiver ran through her as he tore open the envelope, and she drew herself closer together.

"Why, are you cold, my dear?" he asked, glancing at her before he began to read. "Aren't you well? Let us go up to the house, and read the letter there."

"No, no," she answered, steadily; "I'm not cold, I'm perfectly well. I was curious to know what he said; that was all. Do go on."

Easton opened the sheet, and began to read to himself, as people often do with letters when they propose to read them aloud. "Oh!" he said, presently, "excuse me! I didn't know what I was doing. Do you think you'll be able to stand all this?" He held up the eight pages of Gilbert's letter, and then he began faithfully with the date, and read on to the end. The first part of the letter was given to Gilbert's regrets at not having been able to write before. He took it for granted that his sister-in-law had told Easton of his sudden call to go to South America on that business of Mitchell & Martineiro, who wished him to look after some

legal complications of their affairs in Brazil, which needed an American lawyer's eye; and that she had made all amends she could for his going so suddenly.

You were asleep [he wrote] when I went to take leave of you, and on the whole I'm not sorry. A good-by is good at any distance, and I knew I could send you mine. I didn't suppose I should be so long about it; but the truth is that what with putting my own business in order before going, and instructing myself about Mitchell & Martineiro's, in a case where I can represent their interests only in an exterior sort of way, I have not had a moment that I could call yours. I might have sent you a line, of course, but I waited till I could do more than that. I knew you were getting well, and I need not worry about leaving you before you were quite well. And now, after all, when I have a few hours before sailing, and I sit down to write to you, I do not know that I have much to say. Perhaps if I had had days before this, it would have come to the same thing. In fact, it could have come only to one thing under any circumstances. It could have come only to my telling you, with whatever force I had, that in all our recent unhappiness I felt myself wholly and solely at fault. I do not merely mean that you were blameless, but that everyone else but myself was so. I hope this will not come to your eye like an impertinence; it lies under mine like a very vital thing. I do not know what your measure of my blame is, whether it has grown greater or not since we parted; but in my own sight my treatment of you seems inexpiable. Of course I feel that in this separation of ours there are many chances that we may not meet again; but I should like to say this to you if we were to meet every day all our lives. I will not appeal to the kindness of your heart; there ought to be none for me in it. But do not forget me, Easton; and if ever in the future you can think more leniently of me than I deserve, I shall be glad of your pity.

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Farrell, hoarsely.

"Yes, that's all," returned Easton, turning the

pages absently over, and looking up and down the leaves.

Whatever had been her purposes, or hopes, or dreads, the moment had come from which she could not recoil, and in which she stood as absolutely unfriended as in the face of death. Everything had led to this at last; it might have been said that she was born for this alone, so supreme was it over all other fates and chances. If she had hoped for help from any source—from Easton's possible suspicion, from the light in which she had tried to see what she had done with others' eyes, from some confession of Gilbert's in this letter of his—it was all in vain. Everything was remanded to her, and she was to make her choice, with none to urge or stay her. She sat and stared at the man who, she knew, would have given his life to defend her from others, but who was so powerless now to help her against herself. Of all the contending passions of her soul —shame, fear, resentment, and chiefly a frantic longing to discredit the reality of what was, and had been—a momentary scorn came uppermost.

"So!" she cried. "And that's all he had to say!" She caught the letter from Easton's hand, ran her eye swiftly over the closing page, and flung it back to him. "Yes, he was afraid to write it, two hundred miles away; he leaves it all to me. Well, then, I will tell you— Oh," she broke off, "do you love me very, very much? Yes, *I* must tell you, for there is no one else, and, no matter what happens, you *must* know it." She looked at him in an agony of terror and pity; she could not take her

eyes from him while she spoke the words that now came. "He was in love with me; he said so the last moment I saw him; he was so from the first. It was that which made him quarrel with you, and it is that which makes him—he thinks I've told you—ask your pity now."

In the ghastly silence that ensued, they found that they had both risen, and he stood with one hand resting against the trunk of the birch beneath which they had been sitting; Gilbert's letter had fallen, and lay on the ground between them.

Easton made no answer, and tried to make none, standing in a hapless maze. The silence seemed interminable; but it was also intolerable; she recalled him to himself with a wild "Well!" Then he seemed to find his voice a great way off, and a husky murmur preceded his articulate speech.

"Have I kept you apart?" he asked. "Do you love him?"

"*Love* him? I *loathe* him!"

She shuddered to see the hope that rushed into his face, when he said, "Then I pity him with all my heart. How could he help loving you?"

She wrung her hands in despair. "Oh, why don't you kill me, and spare me this. How can I tell you and make you understand? He never would have dared to speak to me if I had not— He never would have dared to speak if he had believed I loved you!"

"*Do* you love me?" he asked, as if he regarded nothing else but that, and he searched with his clear gaze the eyes which she was powerless to avert

She tried to speak, and could not. The shame, more cruel than any crime can bring, which a man feels in such a disillusion, crimsoned his pale visage, and his head fell upon his breast. Again the terrible silence held them both.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she wailed, at last. "What must you think of me? I *did* believe that I loved you once—that day when you asked me; and then when you were taken sick, and I thought you might die, how could I help caring for you? And afterward, when you were better, and you never showed any misgiving, I *couldn't* undeceive you; it had to go on. I *always* respected you more than anyone in the world; you're the best man I ever saw; better than I ever dreamed of; it frightened me to think how far too good for me you were. And why do you blame me so much, now?" she piteously implored. "You said, once, that you didn't ask me to love you; that all you wanted was to love me."

Easton rubbed his hand wearily over his forehead, and drew a long breath. "If I blamed you I was wrong," he answered, gravely. "It was my fault."

His hand began to tremble on the birch, and he sank down on the rock where he had been sitting. She saw his faltering, and dropped on her knees before him, and instinctively cast one arm about him to support him. He put it away. "I'm perfectly well," he said, with his deathly face. "But I shall sit here awhile before I go back to the house. Don't—don't let me keep you."

The dismissal seemed to strike her back from him, but she did not rise. She only dropped her face in the hollow of her rejected arm, and moaned, "Oh, how you must despise me! But don't drive me from you!"

"I didn't mean that," he said; "I thought of sparing you."

"But don't spare me! It's that that drives me wild. I want you to tell me what it is I've done. I want you to judge me."

"Judge yourself, Rosabel. I will not."

"But I can't have any mercy on myself! Oh, keep me from myself! Don't cast me off! I know I'm not worthy of you, but if you love me, *take* me! I will be a good wife to you, indeed I will."

"Oh no," said Easton, in the tone of a man hurt beyond all solace, who faintly refuses some compassionately proffered, impossible kindness. "I have loved you, Heaven knows how dearly, and I could have waited patiently any length of time in the hope of your love; that was what I meant when I said I didn't ask you to love me then. But now—"

She must have felt the exquisite manliness of his intention toward her. Perhaps she contrasted the grandeur which would not reproach her by a word or look, with the relentless bitterness in which Gilbert had retaliated all upon her. She had always admired Easton; it may be that in this moment she felt a thrill of the supreme tenderness. She suddenly clung to his arm. "But I *want* you to take me!" she cried. "Don't you trust me? Don't you

think I know my own heart, even now? Oh, if you will only believe in me again, I know I *shall* love you!"

"No!" said Easton. "I love you too much for that."

"And it is all over, then? Do you break your engagement?"

"It's broken. You must go free of me. I know you would try to give me what you cannot; but only misery could come of trying. It would be worse than my mistake with Gilbert, when I accepted a sacrifice from him that no man should accept from another, because I believed that I could have done as much for him. We thought it our bond of friendship, but it must always have been a galling chain to him. And you are asking to do a thousand times more than he did! No, no; you would only be starving yourself to beggar me. If you loved me, all that's happened would be nothing; but if you had married me, without loving me, you would have done me a wrong that I could never have pardoned. Don't accuse yourself," he said. "If you had loved me, nothing of all this could have happened. Think of that. It was my mistake more than yours; you were unfairly bound to me. Come," he said, rising with a sudden access of strength that belied his pale looks, "I must go to-day." And he led the way back to the house in a silence which neither broke.

She did not answer him by words, then or afterward. But when they entered the dark of the hall

doorway together, she expressed all by an action which was not the less characteristic for being so humble and childlike; she caught up his hand, and, holding it a moment with a clinging stress, carried it to her mouth and reverently kissed it. That was their farewell, and it was both silent and passive on his part. He looked at her with eyes that she did not meet, and moved his lips as if he would say something, but made no sound.

Chapter XIV

THE next morning, after Mrs. Farrell had gone, Rachel went with mechanical exactness about the work of putting in order the room where Easton had lain sick. Her mother came to the door and, looking in, hesitated a moment before she crossed the threshold and sat down in the chair that stood just inside.

"I don't know as you've got any call to hurry so about it, Rachel," she said, with a granite quiet.

"I'd just as soon, mother; I'd rather," answered the girl, as stonily, not ceasing from her work.

The mother put her hand to her passive mouth and then rubbed it up over her cheek and across her forehead, and drew a long, noiseless breath, following the movements of her daughter about the room with her eyes. "I suppose we sha'n't hear from Benny, hardly, for a week or more," she said, after a pause of several minutes. Rachel did not reply, and her mother asked, after another pause, "Rachel, what do you believe made him so set on going away? Do you think it was—"

"I don't want you should ask me, mother, *anything*," answered Rachel, nervously.

The mother waited a moment before she said, perhaps with that insensibility to others' nerves which years often bring, "I was afraid the boy

might have got to caring about *her*. Do you think he had?"

"Yes, I think he had," replied Rachel, abruptly, as if the words had been wrenched from her.

Once more the mother waited before she spoke. She had never talked gossip with her children, and perhaps she was now reconciling to her conscience the appearance of gossip in what she had to say. "I always thought," she began, "that they were both as fine young men as I almost ever saw. I never saw more of a friend than the other one was to this one. Do you think she was much sorry for what she did to part them?"

"Yes, I think she was. She did more than she meant, and I don't know as we ought to be made to answer for more harm than we mean."

"No," said Mrs. Woodward. "At least it isn't for us to say, here. Did you like her as well at the last as you used to?"

"Yes, I liked her," answered Rachel. "Nobody could help that. She was very unhappy, and I never had any call to feel hard against her—on my own account."

"I don't know as I ever knew a person quite like her," mused Mrs. Woodward. "I don't know as I should ever rightly understand her, and I won't judge her, for one; she'll find p'enty to do that. I don't believe but what her feelings were led away for a while by the other one, and I don't see as they ever rightly came back to this one, even supposing that she ever did care much for him."

"Oh, mother, mother, mother!" the girl broke

out, and cast herself into a chair, and hid her face on the bed.

A distress passed over the stony composure of the elder woman's face, but she sat quiet, and did not go near her child or touch her. What comfort her children got from her went from heart to heart, or rather from conscience to conscience, without open demonstration; she hid her natural affections as if they were sins, but they ruled her in secret, and doubtless now her heart bled with the pity her arms withheld. She did not move from her place, and while the girl sobbed out the secret of a love which she had never yet owned to herself, the mother did not show by any sign or change of countenance that the revelation either surprised or shocked her. She may indeed have always suspected it, but however that was, she now accepted the fact as she would any calamity, in silence, and whatever inward trouble it gave her did not appear even to the solitude in which Rachel's hidden face left her. She waited patiently, but when at last the girl lifted her face and sat with her head thrown back and her eyelids fallen, the mother still did not speak; she left her to deal with her pain alone, as was best. But that evening she came to Rachel's chamber with her lamp in her hand, and took her place near her where she lay listless in her rocking-chair.

"Before Mrs. Gilbert went away," the mother abruptly began, "she came and had a little talk with me about you, Rachel. I never told you, and I don't know as I ever should."

Rachel gave no token of interest. Mrs. Woodward went on:

"She seemed to think a good deal of that picture of yours, and she spoke as if you'd ought not to neglect any providence that put it in your way to improve yourself. I don't use her words, but that's what they come to in the end. She said if you would like to go down and study drawing in Boston or New York, this winter, she wanted I should let her lend you the money to do it. I was put to it what to say without seeming to hurt her feelings. I didn't make any direct answer at the time, and I haven't since. I wa'n't sure in my own mind whether we should do right to accept of such an offer unless we could see our way clear to pay the money back, and what made me more doubtful was her saying that you'd ought to be very certain of your own feelings, whether you really wanted to be a painter or not, for if you didn't it would be a misery every way if you was one. I don't know a great deal about such things, but I thought that was sensible. She said there wa'n't any doubt about your making a living that way, if once you gave your mind to it."

Still Rachel did not change her posture or expression, but she passed her fingers over the hem of her apron across her lap.

"As to the money," Mrs. Woodward went on, "there's your school money in the bank; you've worked hard enough for that, and it's rightfully yours. I know you meant to give it to James for his schooling, but now it don't seem quite fair you

should. Why don't you take it yourself, and go off somewheres, and study, the way Mrs. Gilbert said?"

"I don't want the money, mother," said the girl, coldly.

Mrs. Woodward waited awhile before she asked, "Don't you feel sure 't you want to study in that way?"

"Yes, I think I could do it. Of course it isn't as if I were a man, but I believe I could be a painter, and I should like it better than teaching."

"Then why don't you take up with the idea? It would be a little change for you; and maybe, if you was away from the place for a while, you might —get to feeling differently."

The mother was patient with her daughter while the girl sat thinking. The countenance of neither changed when at last the girl broke silence and said, very steadily, "I might go in the spring, mother. But I'm going to stay here this winter. If I've got any trouble, I can't run away from it, and I wouldn't if I could. If the trouble is here, the help is here, too, I presume." After a little pause, she added, "I don't want you should speak to me about it again, mother—ever."

The mother said nothing, but awkwardly rose, and moved shyly to where her daughter sat. Her mouth trembled, but, whatever intent she had, she ended by merely laying on the girl's head her large, toil-worn, kitchen-coarsened hand, with its bony knuckles and stubbed, broken nails. She let it rest there a moment and then went softly out of the room.

Chapter XV

IN an orchestra chair at the theater sat a stout, good-natured-looking gentleman, iron gray where he was not bald, with a double chin smooth-shaven between iron-gray whiskers, and beside him sat a lady somewhat his junior in appearance, pale and invalid-like, to whom the strong contrast of her silvery hair and her thick, dark eyebrows gave a singular distinction; from some little attentions and neglects it could be seen that they were husband and wife. The husband seemed tranquilly expectant, and the wife nervously so, and as they talked together, waiting for the curtain to rise, he spoke in a slow, rich, easy voice, with a smile of amiable humor, while she had a more eager and sarcastic air, which at times did not veil a real anxiety of feeling.

"And that is just where you misconceive the whole affair," the lady was saying.

"I don't see," said the gentleman.

"Why," demanded the lady, despairingly, "can't you imagine a woman's liking to triumph over people with her beauty, and yet meaning it to be a purely æsthetic triumph?"

"No, I can't," said the gentleman, with placid candor.

"Well, women can," said the lady, conclusively, and the gentleman submitted in silence.

Presently he asked, "Isn't she rather old for a novice?"

"She's twenty-six, if you call that old. She's a novice to the stage, but she's been an actress all her life."

The gentleman laughed in the contented fashion of gentlemen who think their wives are wits, and said: "I think you're decidedly hard upon her to-night, Susan. It seems to me you have been more merciful at times."

"Oh, at times! I've never been of one mind about her half an hour together, and I don't expect to be hard upon her the whole evening, now. The last day I saw her at the farm, as I've often told you, I pitied her from the bottom of my heart, but before we said good-by I suspected that I had been the subject of one of her little dramatic effects. Can't you imagine a person who really feels all she thinks she ought to feel at any given time?"

"No," said the gentleman, with cheerful resignation, "that's beyond my depth again."

"Well, she's that kind; or I've fancied so in my skeptical moods about her. If she dramatizes her part to-night half as well as she used to dramatize herself, she'll be a great actress. But that remains to be seen. When I first heard she was going on the stage, it seemed like a clew to everything; she says she always wanted to be an actress; and I felt that it was a perfect inspiration. It would give her ex-

citement and admiration, and it would multiply the subjects of her effects to any extent. It always did seem a ridiculous waste that she should merely fascinate one man at a time; she ought to have had thousands. But I'm not so certain, now, after all, that she's found her destiny."

"Why?"

"Why, a stage success might be very much to her taste, while she mightn't at all like the trouble of making it. I think she has a real theatrical genius, but I suppose the stage takes a great deal of self-denial and constancy, and she's fickle as the wind."

"Oh, come, now, Susan, you know you said yesterday that, after all, you did believe she had a lasting regard for William's friend."

"Yes, that's a great puzzle and mystery. Perhaps it was because she had broken with him. I didn't infer from anything she said that their acquaintance now was of anything but a friendly sort. I wish I had felt authorized to ask just how it was renewed," said the lady, regretfully.

"I wish you had. I should have liked to know. There must be something extraordinary about her to enable her to keep him for a friend after all that happened."

"Oh, did I ever pretend there wasn't something extraordinary about her? There was everything extraordinary about her! And there are times when I can't help admiring a sort of moral heroism she had. I think she was fascinated for a while with the dreadfulness of flirting with William under the circumstances; but not one woman in a thou-

sand would have had the courage to do what she did when she found it was becoming serious with him."

"Very likely. But I have a higher opinion of women. My sense of right and wrong has not been shaken, like some people's, by this enchantress. I can't help thinking it might not have been so rough on *him* if her moral heroism had begun a little sooner—say before the flirtation."

"Oh, the more I think about it, the less I pity him in that matter. He knew perfectly well that he was doing wrong. Men ought to do right, even if it doesn't please women."

The gentleman bowed his bald head in a fit of laughter. "I have no doubt those were Eve's very words to Adam," he chuckled; but the lady, without laughing, continued–

"And when the worst had come to the worst with Easton, it seems she didn't spare herself. She told him everything."

"Perhaps she might have spared *him* somewhat if she had not been quite so frank."

"It was her *duty* to tell him!" rejoined the lady, sternly, "and I honor her for doing it. She never could have gone on and married him, with all that in her heart."

"At any rate she didn't go on and marry him. And I shall always contend that she was a hardly used woman; engaging herself to a man she merely pitied, under the mistaken impression that she was in love with him, and then—when she found that she didn't want his friend either—dismissing the

poor fellow with a final misgiving that perhaps she *did* like him, after all. I say it's a case of unmerited suffering, if ever there was one."

"Oh, it's all very well to talk! But how do you reconcile such contradictions?"

"I don't. But I'm certain of one thing: she wasn't trying any of her little dramatic effects on you when she called yesterday and made you her confidante." The gentleman here laughed so loud that the sound of his own voice alarmed him. He looked round, and saw that the seats about them were rapidly filling up, and he fell to studying his play-bill with conscious zeal.

By and by he turned again to his wife, and whispered, "I don't think William's peace of mind was permanently affected by his romance with your friend; he appeared to be in good spirits the other day when I saw him in New York, and was taking a good deal of interest in the fine arts, I fancied, from his behavior to your little protégée."

"William has been very polite and very good; I shall always feel grateful to him for his kindness to her. He must have found it difficult at first; she's very odd and doesn't invite attention, though of course she's glad of it, at heart. Yes, it was very, very considerate, and I shall take it as the greatest favor that William could have done me."

"Well, I don't know. He didn't seem to be regarding the affair in the light of a self-sacrifice. Suppose he had rather lost the sense of it's being a favor to you?"

"I should like that all the better."

Those who remember the impression made among people who knew of her, by the announcement that Mrs. Farrell was going upon the stage, will recall the curiosity which attended her appearance in Boston, after her debut in a Western city, where she had played a season. There is always something vastly pitiable in the first attempts of a woman to please the public from the stage; this is especially the case if she is not to the theater born, and confronts in her audience the faces she has known in the world; and her audience may have felt a peculiar forlornness in Mrs. Farrell's position: at any rate it showed itself the kindest of houses, and seized with eager applause every good point of her performance. Her beauty in itself was almost sufficient to achieve success for her. It had never appeared to greater advantage. During the first two acts, it seemed to prosper from moment to moment, under all those admiring eyes, like the immediate gift of Heaven, as if she were inspired to be more and more beautiful by her consciousness of her beauty's power; and whether she walked or sat, or only stirred in some chosen posture amid the volume of her robes, she expressed a grace that divinely fascinated. Her girlish presence enabled her to realize that Juliet to many whose sensitive ideal refused the robust pretensions of more mature actresses; she might have played the part well or not, but there could be no question but she looked it. She had costumed it with a splendor which the modern taste might have accused of overdressing, but which was not discordant with a poetic sense of

the magnificence of mediæval Verona. Her Juliet was no blond, Gretchen-like maiden in blue and white, but an impassioned southern girl in the dark reds and rich greens that go well with that beauty; she might have studied her dress from that of some superb patrician in a canvas of Cagliari. But with her beauty, her grace, and her genius for looking and dressing the character, her perfect triumph ended; there was something perplexingly indefinite in the nature or the cause of her failure, at those points where she failed. To some she simply appeared unequal to a sustained imagination of the character. Others thought her fatigued by the physical effort, which must be a very great one. Perhaps no one was of a very decided mind about her performance.

"It was good, yes—and it wasn't good, either," said one of those critical spirits, rather commoner in Boston than elsewhere, who analyze and refine and re-refine and shrink from a final impression, with a perseverance that leaves one in doubt whether they have any opinion about the matter. "I should say she had genius, yes; genius for something—I don't know; I suppose the drama. I dare say I saw her without the proper perspective; I was crowded so close to her by what I'd heard of her off the stage, don't you know. I don't think the part was well chosen; and yet she did some things uncommonly well; all that passionate love-making of the first part was magnificent; but there was some detracting element, even there—I don't

know what; I suppose she didn't let you think enough of Juliet; you couldn't help thinking how very charming *she* was, herself; she realized the part the wrong way. There was inspiration in it, and I should say study; yes, there was a good deal of study; but, after all, it wasn't so much art as it was nature and artifice. It wanted smoothness, unity; perhaps that might come, by and by. She had a very kind house; you know what our audiences usually are; they wouldn't turn the thumb down, but they'd make an unlucky gladiator *wish* they would. But they were very good to her, last night, and applauded her hits like a little man. She didn't seem to have given *herself* a fair chance. Perhaps she wasn't artistically large enough for the theater. I shouldn't have said, at first, that she was particularly suggestive of the home circle; very likely, if I'd met her off the stage, I should have pronounced her too theatrical; and yet there was a sort of appealing domesticity about her, after all—especially in her failures. It's a pity she couldn't take some particular line of the profession, in which she could somehow produce a *social* effect, don't you know! I'll tell you what; she could do something perfectly charming in the way of what they call sketches—character sketches—little morsels of drama that she could have all to herself, with the audience in her confidence—a sort of partner in the enterprise, like the audience at private theatricals. That's it; that's the very thing! She'd be the greatest possible success in private theatricals."

"Well, Robert, it's better than I ever dreamt she could do," said Mrs. Gilbert, as they drove home from the theater. "But what a life for a woman! How hard and desolate at the best. Well, she's sufficiently punished!"

"Yes," said her husband, "it's a great pity they couldn't somehow make up their minds to marry each other."

"Never! There are things they can never get over."

"Oh, people get over all sorts of things. And even according to your own showing, she behaved very well when it came to the worst."

"Yes, I shall always say that of her. But she was to blame for it's coming to the worst. No, a whole lifetime wouldn't be enough to atone for what she's done."

"It wouldn't, in a romance. But in life you have to make some allowance for human nature. I had no idea she was so charming."

"Robert," said Mrs. Gilbert, sternly, "do you think it would be right for a woman to be happy after she had made others so wretched?"

"Well, not at once. But I don't see how her remaining unhappy is to help matters. You say that you really think she does like him, after all?"

"She would hardly talk of anything else—where he was, and what he saw, and what he said. Yes, I should say she does like him."

"Then I don't see why he shouldn't come back from Europe and marry her, when she makes her final failure on the stage. I would, in his place."

"My dear, you *know* you wouldn't!"

"Well, then, *he* would in *my* place. Have it your own way, my love."

Mr. Gilbert seemed to think he had made a joke, but his wife did not share his laugh.

"Robert," she said, after a thoughtful pause, "the lenient way in which you look at her is worse than wrong; it's weak."

"Very likely, my dear; but I can't help feeling it's a noble weakness. Why, of course I know that she spread a ruin round, for a while, but, as you say, it seems to have been more of a ruin than she meant; and there's every probability that she's been sorry enough for it since."

"Oh! And so you think such a person as that can change by trying—and atone for what she's done by being *sorry* for it!" said Mrs. Gilbert, with scorn.

"Well, Susan, I should not like to be such a heathen as *not* to think so," responded her husband, with an assumption none the less intolerable because, while his position was in itself impregnable, it left a thousand things to be said.

THE END

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